The New Criterion

January 2001

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
Reflections on "MOMA2000" *by Hilton Kramer*, 4
Patrick Leigh Fermor *by Ben Downing*, 9
William Makepeace Thackeray *by Brooke Allen*, 19
Emmanuel Chabrier *by James F. Penrose*, 29
Poems *by Timothy Steele & Dick Davis*, 37

Theater: The measure of smartness *by Mark Steyn*, 40; **Art:** Evaristo Baschenis *by Karen Wilkin*, 46; Gallery chronicle *by Daniel Kunitz*, 51; **Architecture:** Cass Gilbert *by Francis Morrone*, 54; **Music:** Earl Wild at 85 *by Jay Nordlinger*, 59; **The media:** The familiar hypocrisy *by James Bowman*, 62
Books: *Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, Carlos Alberto Montaner & Alvaro Vargas Llosa* The guide to the perfect Latin American idiot & *Richard Gott* In the shadow of the liberator *reviewed by Anthony Daniels*, 67; *Martin Gardner* Did Adam & Eve have navels? *reviewed by John Derbyshire*, 71; *Robert L. Mack* Thomas Gray *reviewed by Paul Dean*, 73; *Peter Brooks* Troubling confessions *reviewed by Marc M. Arkin*, 76; *Jorge Luis Borges* This craft of verse *reviewed by Alexander Coleman*, 79

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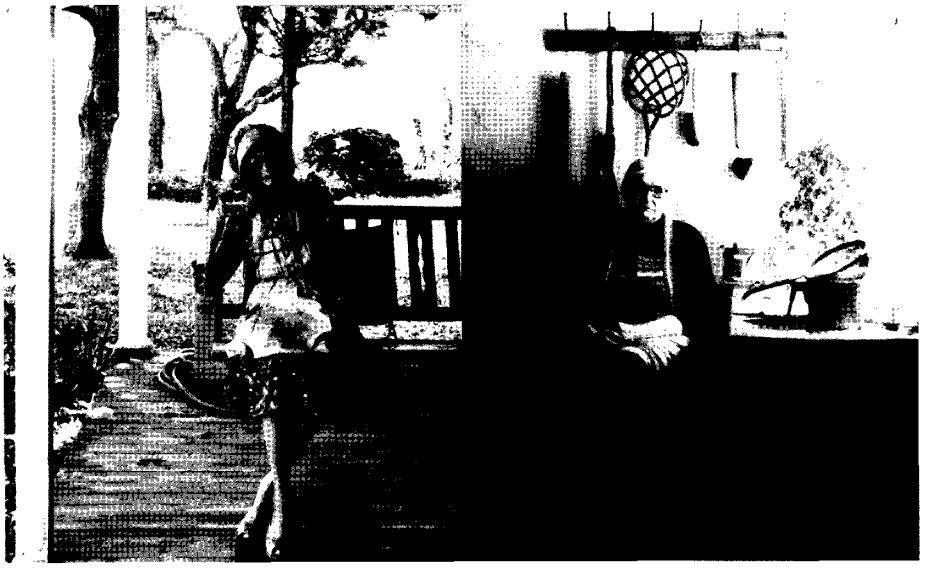

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Notes & Comments: January 2001

Michigan's thin line

Doublethink *means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.*
—George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

We have often had occasion to dilate on the Orwellian nature of the phrase "affirmative action" in this space. We are going to do so again. Memories are short; ideological pressure is unremitting; in short, some things cannot be repeated too often. *Rhetorically*, as we all know, "affirmative action" is redolent of high principle and the struggle for equality. One can almost hear strains of the Marseillaise echoing behind its syllables—or maybe that sound is only the thump of a judge's gavel ordering some new social experiment. In any event, "affirmative action" suggests, . . . well, something *good*: something positive, something *affirmative*. (Also, of course, something pragmatic: we're talking about *action* here, not theorizing: *results*, not starry-eyed speculation.) And the opponents of affirmative action, what do *they* want? Something beginning with "N" at any rate: something involving the word "no," something *negative*, and no doubt impractical to boot.

In actuality, of course, affirmative action is first and foremost a powerful engine for perpetuating preferential treatment and discrimination based on race, sex, ethnic origin, or some other approved badge of victim status. It is not about assuring equality of opportunity but artificially—that is, judicially—enforcing equality of outcome.

It sounds quite different when put like that, doesn't it? But liberals never do put it like that. They love the phrase "affirmative action" precisely because it allows them to avoid acknowledging—perhaps even recognizing—the unpleasant actuality at the heart of affirmative action. This is one reason that connoisseurs of Orwellian obfuscation cannot admire the phrase "affirmative action" too greatly. It is a gift that just keeps on giving. It is vague enough to cover nearly any contingency, pompous enough always to garner partisan support. Talk of "affirmative action" automatically catapults one onto the moral high ground, at least rhetorically, even if it allows one to pursue inequitable programs of social engineering and racial or sexual redress. (Some liberals acknowledge the inequity involved in enforcing the diktats of affirmative-action programs; those who do will generally point out—usually *sotto voce* and with a rueful smile—that one cannot make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.)

Perhaps the greatest boon conferred by embracing affirmative action is an insensibility to contradiction. It nudges one

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blissfully over the "hard place" one faces when simultaneously affirming X and not-X. It is an invitation to what Orwell called Doublethink. College admissions are a laboratory case. We all know about the many colleges whose applications begin by declaring that admission will be granted without consideration of race, sex, creed, or national origin—and then go on a few pages later to inform applicants that it is to *their advantage* if they are black, Hispanic, American Indian, etc., etc. (We have been told, but have not verified, that at least one distinguished university even has a category for "current gender.") "Check here," they say, "and we'll see what we can do for you."

It turns out, of course, that many universities are prepared to do quite a lot for applicants who meet the correct racial/sexual/ethnic profile. Consider the University of Michigan. Just last month, a federal judge ruled that the two-tiered admission system employed by the university from 1995 to 1998 was unconstitutional because it employed different admission criteria for whites and minorities. It was, plain and simple, a matter of separate but unequal. Well and good, you say: at last a victory in the war against quotas. Not so fast. For in the same ruling, Judge Patrick J. Duggan said that the university's current policy, which automatically awards twenty points (out of a possible 150) to black and Hispanic applicants is just fine. So it is "No" to what Judge Duggan called "fixed racial quotas" but "full steam ahead" when it comes to "consideration of an applicant's race during the admissions process." No wonder he went on to observe that "in situations such as this, it is often a thin line that divides the permissible from the impermissible." So thin, we fear, that one would have to be an affirmative-action activist to be sure of discerning it.

Let's put Michigan's twenty-point bonus into perspective. As *The New York Times* reported on December 14, applicants can get up to eighty points for their grades. They can get another twelve points for stellar performance on so-called standardized tests ("so-called" because affirmative action has come to the Scholastic Aptitude Tests as well: see our note "Boycott the SAT" in the October 1999 issue of *The New Criterion*). Being a Michigan resident gets them ten points, being the child of an alumnus four. According to the *Times*, "an outstanding essay, leadership, or personal achievement are each worth 3 points," that is, a mere nine points total for factors that one might have thought should count—that once upon a time in fact did count—a great deal in the admission process. But then what is a terrific essay, outstanding leadership, or superior "personal achievement" in comparison with skin color or (the right) ethnic origin? Not much in Michigan, apparently, for that is all it takes to qualify for the university's twenty-point gift.

You see the vertiginous land of Oz one enters by embracing affirmative action. But what is a poor judge to do? Back in the late 1970s in the infamous Bakke case, the U.S. Supreme Court institutionalized confusion by simultaneously forbidding explicit quotas while upholding the unofficial quotas mandated by the demand for "diversity"—another Orwellian mantra. The Michigan ruling dramatizes that confusion. What it amounts to is a species of racial profiling, though of course we must not call it that. At bottom, affirmative action is the application of welfare mentality to academia and the business world. It is a hand out, not a hand up, and its ultimate effect is to harden the very prejudice it claims to be battling. It creates a two-track system in which some people succeed by dint of hard work, talent, and accomplishment, while others succeed at least partly by dint of racially- or sexually-mandated preferential treatment. Everyone recognizes this, the beneficiaries as well as the victims of affirmative action. The result is an increase in cynicism, resentment, and, not least, the selfish spirit of litigiousness.

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Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the Michigan decision is the suggestion that the policies it endorses will have to go on indefinitely. According to Judge Duggan, the University of Michigan's points-for-minorities system is not a temporary expedient but one attempt to address a permanent inequality. "[T]he need for diversity lives on perpetually," he was quoted in the *Times* as saying, and programs to enforce it could therefore continue until the "day when universities are able to achieve the desired diversity without resort to racial preferences." "Perpetually" is a very long time. Today Michigan gives minorities twenty points; maybe it will have to be fifty next year to achieve the same result. George Orwell encapsulated the contradiction inherent in such procedures perfectly when he wrote, in *Animal Farm*, that "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." There, too, the rhetoric of fairness was employed to institutionalize the reality of inequality.

We observed above that embracing affirmative action tended to impart an insensibility to contradiction. Insensibility, it is worth noting, is not the same as immunity, as those unfortunate people who lack feeling in some part of their body know well. Just because you are without pain does not mean your hand has not been burned.

Anti-Americanism alive and well

So much ink has been spilled over election 2000 that we are loath, at this late date, to add to the ocean. As we noted last month, writing a mere week or so after the November 7 election, the Gore team's insistence on pushing the election into the courts by challenging the results of the mandatory recount in Florida set an ominous precedent. This was an issue that Chief Justice Wells summed up perfectly in his dissent from the Florida Supreme Court's decision to overturn a lower court and order a manual recount of "undervotes" throughout the state. "[W]e run a great risk," he wrote, "that every election will result in judicial testing. Judicial restraint in respect to elections is absolutely necessary because the health of our democracy depends on elections being decided by voters—not by judges." We must all be grateful, no matter which candidate we supported, that the U.S. Supreme Court finally put an end to the madness of judicial activism in Florida.

We need be less grateful for some of the snide commentary on the election by various foreign observers. Let us leave to one side the expostulations of totalitarian henchmen like Fidel Castro, who gleefully seized on the protracted U.S. election as an opportunity to lecture us about the nature of democracy. More troubling were the comments of the French prime minister Lionel Jospin who, among other things, questioned the legitimacy of George W. Bush's victory and sniffed that he hoped that Americans would "draw the lessons in time for the next election." As Mark Steyn asked in the London *Daily Telegraph*: "What lessons would those be, Mr. Jospin? Scrap the Electoral College? Move to direct presidential election? Tear up the Constitution and rewrite it every generation, as the French do? Where are you up to now? Fifth Republic? Sixth Republic? Geez, get me a Gore lawyer: I need a manual recount of French constitutions." Jospin's remarks are only the latest blossom in the widespread new flowering of that hardy perennial, French anti-Americanism. Indeed, anti-Americanism was an unspoken theme at the recent French-led European Union convocation in Nice just as it stands behind the French demand for the creation of European-wide "rapid reaction" military force separate from NATO. Of course, the French do not propose *paying* for this new European army—they want the Germans to shoulder the lion's share of that burden. To what end? An enhancement of French *gloire*, primarily. We all knew that "bureaucracy" was a French word; it is useful to be reminded that "chauvinism" is as well.

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Telling stories, denying style: Reflections on "MOMA2000"

by Hilton Kramer

"L—d!" said my mother, "what is all this story about?"—"A Cock and a Bull," said Yorick.
—*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy.*

It has come as no great surprise that the series of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art called "MOMA2000," which began in the fall of 1999 with a focus on "People," "Places," and "Things" in art drawn from the years 1880–1920, has given us in its culminating survey of the period 1960–2000 a show largely concentrated on politics, propaganda, and pop culture.[1] From the outset, after all, it was one of the primary purposes of "MOMA2000" to offer the museum public a revisionist account of the history of modernism—a new "narrative," as the MOMA authorities happily described this rewriting of history. It is in the nature of this new narrative to accord a radical priority to stories and subjects at the expense of form, style, and a variety of other aesthetic considerations heretofore deemed essential to the comprehension and judgment of modernist art. Accordingly, the three ambitious exhibitions that have comprised "MOMA2000"—"Modern*Starts*," "Making Choices," and the current "Open Ends"—have been designed to conform to this new narrative, which effectively deconstructs the aesthetic assumptions upon which the museum itself was founded.

In "MOMA2000," modernism has thus been stripped of its aesthetic ontology in the name of a hierarchy of preferred subjects, with politics and pop culture now—in the "Open Ends" finale to the series—foremost among them. In the absence of aesthetic considerations, critical judgment—which includes, of course, curatorial judgment—has reverted to a system that looks more and more like a parody of the system that governed the pre-modern official Salons, in which landscape painting, for example, was deemed to represent a lower order of pictorial achievement than history painting, and all works of art were classified according to subject matter.

This was the system that was successfully overthrown by Courbet, Manet, and the Impressionists in one of the crucial early chapters of the history of modern art, and its demise remained—for artists as well as critics—one of the foundations of artistic thought in the heyday of the modernist movement. It was upon the aesthetic implications of this modernist rejection of academic hierarchies that the collection and exhibition policies of the Museum of Mod-

1 "MOMA2000" opened with "Modern*Starts*: People, Places, Things" (October 1999–March 2000). The second part, "Making Choices," was on view from March 16–September 12, 2000. The final installment, "Open Ends," opened on September 28, 2000 and runs until January 30, 2001. Catalogues for each of the exhibitions were published by the Museum of Modern Art and are distributed by Harry N. Abrams.

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ern Art were based during the greater part of its history.

This did not mean, either in the art world at large or at MOMA itself, that there was no recognition granted to styles and ideas that dissented from modernist practice. One need only cite the sympathetic attention accorded by MOMA to the realist art of Edward Hopper, the political art of the Mexican muralists, and sundry other varieties of Regionalist, Social Realist, and Magic Realist art in the 1930s and 1940s as evidence to the contrary. What it did mean, however, was that a useful distinction was made—useful precisely because of its aesthetic efficacy—between what Matthew Arnold once famously defined as "the master-current" of an epoch and the many competing currents of artistic endeavor that inevitably accompany mainstream imperatives.

The idea of a discernible master-current in the art of the modern era is now much ridiculed in certain academic and museum circles, and the campaign to discredit it is one in which MOMA in this country and the new Tate Modern in Britain have taken the lead. And there are, to be sure, many reasons to reject the idea. It undoubtedly smacks of elitism, and certainly doesn't conform to the strictures of political correctness. Aesthetic judgments about art are definitely not an equal-opportunity enterprise. And the very thought of a master-current inevitably suggests that many widely admired works of art would have to be considered—well, minor. Above all, the idea of a master-current suggests the existence of masters and mastery in art, which is a way of thinking about art that runs contrary to both the spirit and practice of the contemporary art scene in this first decade of the twenty-first century.

Yet, there is this to be said for the idea of a discernible master-current in the art of the modern era: the greatest artists of the period believed in it and set their goals by it. Whether this master-current was thought to be represented by Courbet or Manet or Matisse or Picasso or Mondrian or Miró or Giacometti or Pollock—for the idea of a master-current is nothing if not dynamic—it was an idea that existed, first of all, in the minds of the artists who were acutely aware of where they stood in relation to it and where they aspired to stand. In other words, they were acutely aware of their historical situation. To reject this idea of historical chronology in the presentation of art to the public—especially to today's public, which is severely handicapped by an absence of cultural memory—is therefore to reject a fundamental component of modern artistic thought. Which, to say the least, is a very odd thing for an institution that still calls itself the Museum of Modern Art to be doing.

When "Modern*Starts*"[2] opened in the fall of 1999, some of the installations were so brilliant and the overall level of aesthetic quality so extraordinary that the deficiencies and distortions governing its organization did not at first glance seem all that important. On subsequent visits to "Modern*Starts*," however, the distortions of history—or what might better be called the denials of history—became more and more apparent, and foremost among them was MOMA's decision to deny the birth of abstract art any specific attention in an exhibition purporting to cover the period, 1880–1920, in which abstraction first emerged as a powerful modernist imperative.

In an exhibition which claimed to bring the public an account of the way "People," "Places," and "Things" were represented in the modernist art of those four decades, abstract art proved to be an intellectual embarrassment. Making its first appearance in the years immediately prior to the 1914 war, it was undoubtedly the most radical of all the innovations which modernist painting and sculpture can lay claim to, and it continued to dominate much of avant-garde artistic thought and practice for the remainder of the modernist era. Yet because abstrac-

2 See "Rethinking modernism," by Karen Wilkin, in *The New Criterion* (January 2000).

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tion could not be easily made to conform to the curatorial scenario that governed "Modern*Starts*"—a scenario wedded to some loosely conceived notions of "figural" representation—the birth and influence of abstract art were not deemed sufficiently important to merit special attention.

This is not to say that abstract paintings and sculpture were not included in either "Modern*Starts*" or the exhibitions that followed. On the contrary, they were sort of smuggled into "MOMA2000" under false passports, so to speak. They were assigned their places according to the themes that were alleged—in some cases by the artists themselves but more often by the whims of the curators—to be the subjects of their work. And by that act of bad faith, the aesthetic importance of abstract art was simply dropped as a subject to be discussed.

In his introductory essay for the catalogue of "Modern*Starts*," John Elderfield, himself an authority on the history of abstract art, admitted as much. "It had originally been our idea to devote a separate section to abstraction," he wrote.

> We felt that this was necessary, not only because of the intrinsic importance to our period of the creation of abstract art, but also because of the difficulty of its comprehension, even now, nearly a century later. It took quite a long time before we realized that, by dealing with abstraction separately, we were creating enormous problems for ourselves, and quite possibly for the viewer, too.

And so the difficulty of comprehending abstract art was compounded by a decision to pass it off as something else.

In "Making Choices," the second installment of "MOMA2000" that purported to give us an account of the 1920–1960 years, abstraction was more generously represented, to be sure, but once again the abstract paintings were tethered to a variety of subjects and stories—a few actually relevant to the art, but many not—that had the effect of blunting their impact as abstraction, especially for viewers encountering them for the first time. Consider, as an egregious example, the hapless fate of Miró's *Birth of the World* (1929). This painting is surely one of the greatest in the entire canon of abstract art, a judgment silently confirmed by the fact that it was shown twice in "MOMA2000"—first in the "Modern*Starts*" segment, though it doesn't belong to the period ostensibly covered by that segment, and then again in "Making Choices." In neither context, however, was it made possible to understand the place that the painting occupies in the aesthetic history of abstract painting—a history that can be traced from Kandinsky to Arp to Miró, and then from Miró to the Abstract Expressionism of the New York School. André Breton's characterization of *Birth of the World* as "the *Demoiselles* of the *informel*"—meaning, of course, that it occupied a place in the history of *informel* abstraction comparable to that of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the history of Cubism—got the matter exactly right. But in "MOMA2000" the painting was twice orphaned from its own history. And so were many other major examples of abstract art.

This is not to say that figurative painting always fared much better in "MOMA2000." It was a pleasant change to see examples of Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Rackstraw Downes, Philip Pearlstein, and certain other figurative painters on the walls of the Modern after so many years of neglect, but there was a double downside even to this unexpected benefaction. Many of the pictures selected for "Making Choices" were minor examples of the artists' work, and even these pictures were accompanied by so many really inferior examples of figurative painting from MOMA's collection that the entire attempt to remedy prior neglect of contemporary figurative painting ended in a considerable muddle. And in the "Open Ends" segment of "MOMA2000," which purports to account for the 1960–2000 period, there is scarcely a trace of the best American figurative painting to be seen here in recent years. So an attempted remedy for prior

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neglect in "Making Choices" is followed by current neglect in "Open Ends."

Clearly, the curatorial mindset at MOMA is still so fixated on whatever can be construed as "avant-garde"—a term now more aptly applied to restaurant menus and sex-change surgery than to anything happening in the world of art and culture—that painting itself is no longer of compelling interest if it cannot claim to be "about" some sensational political subject. Which brings us to the single most astonishing aspect of "MOMA2000": its elevation of Gerhard Richter's cycle of paintings about the fate of the German terrorists known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang to a position of unrivaled preeminence in the art of the last four decades—the only achievement of the period addressed in "Open Ends" to merit a special monograph of its own.[3]

Richter completed this series of fifteen paintings, called *October 18, 1977*, in 1988. MOMA acquired them for its permanent collection, at a price that was said to be $3 million, in 1995, which was when they were first exhibited at the museum. To underscore the exceptional importance which MOMA attributes to Richter's work, for which a retrospective exhibition is planned for 2002, the museum has now published a hardcover book—*Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977*, written by MOMA curator Robert Storr and running to some 150 pages of text, pictures, and notes. What Mr. Storr has given us in this book is not exactly a study of Mr. Richter's art, though some very grand claims are made for the *October 18, 1977* paintings in the course of what amounts to a prose elegy mourning the demise of the radical political "ideals" of the 1960s and 1970s. Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, and their fellow political terrorists are thus eulogized and sentimentalized as fallen warriors in this struggle to realize those ideals, and Gerhard Richter is acclaimed for his artistic heroism in commemorating their political martyrdoms.

3 *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977*, by Robert Storr (151 pages, $35).

As I am cited in Mr. Storr's text as one of the "right-wing commentators" who registered a "hostile response" to the *October 18, 1977* paintings when they were first exhibited at MOMA in 1995, it may be appropriate for me to quote some passages from the article I wrote on that occasion in *The New York Observer*.

> In 1968, in what was then West Germany, there was formed a leftist terrorist organization that called itself the Red Army Faction but quickly became better known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang—named for its principal leaders, Andreas Baader, who was then twenty-five, and Ulrike Meinhof, who was then thirty-four.
>
> Even by the demented standards of the time, the Baader-Meinhof Gang was renowned for the viciousness of the violence it conducted against innocent victims who were deemed to be class enemies. Those selected for kidnapping and assassination—people prominent in business, finance, and public life—were, in fact, a lot like the kind of people who serve on the board of the Museum of Modern Art. They were people of wealth and distinction earmarked for extinction precisely because they were people of wealth and distinction. In the minds of Baader, Meinhof, and their cohorts, that was justification enough for a sentence of death.

In 1976, the gang was arrested and imprisoned, and about their deaths I wrote as follows:

> On October 18, 1977, three members of the group—including Andreas Baader—were found to have shot themselves in their jail cells. A little earlier, Ulrike Meinhof had hanged herself in her cell. According to a statement by the Museum of Modern Art, "Though their deaths were pronounced suicides, the authorities were suspected of murder."

I then quoted the following passage from Walter Laqueur's *The Age of Terrorism* (1987) on the gang's political ideals:

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> Their policy was not to fight for the "oppressed and exploited" in their own country but to destroy the "islands of wealth in Western Europe," to act as agents of a Third World which existed only in their imagination: hence their collaboration with terrorists from Latin America and the Middle East.

About the *October 18, 1977* paintings, I wrote:

> As examples of the art of painting, alas, they don't amount to much at all, and would certainly have little claim on the attention of the art world without the support of the political legend they were created to evoke. They consist of blurry, arty renderings of news photos of some of the protagonists, their huge public funeral procession, their prison cells, and so on. The gray, blurry images are deliberately meant to be difficult to "read," and the problem of their legibility is said, of course, to be an important part of their meaning.

Mr. Storr's new book on the subject is a distended gloss on the alleged problem of reading not only Mr. Richter's paintings but also the political ideals they were created to commemorate. As political analysis, much of the text is a tendentious humbug, for it repeatedly exalts what it pretends to find ambiguous in both the so-called ideals and the real-life crimes of the Baader-Meinhof Gang. And as art criticism it is similarly tendentious in pretending to find problematic what is plainly evident to the naked eye: that Mr. Richter has produced a series of paintings that attempt to aestheticize the politics of terrorism. To take refuge from that reality in the looking-glass world of moral ambiguity is itself an act of moral evasion.

What makes both the exhibition of the *October 18, 1977* paintings in "MOMA2000" and the publication of Mr. Storr's monograph important, however, is what they may signify about the future of the Museum of Modern Art. Like the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum, MOMA now seems to be determined to transform itself into a sort of museum of material culture where aesthetic issues are sidelined in favor of trendy social and political narratives. This, certainly, is the course that has been traced in many of the separate sections of "MOMA 2000" over the past year. In retrospect, I think we shall look back on "MOMA2000" as having been a trial run for the greatly expanded MOMA of the future. With the Gerhard Richter retrospective already scheduled for 2002, I think we can count on it.

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Philhellene's progress: Patrick Leigh Fermor

by Ben Downing

I have carried the soldier's musket, the traveler's stick, the pilgrim's staff.
—Chateaubriand

The captive must have been exhausted and afraid, but when, on the fourth day of his grueling forced march across Crete, he saw dawn break behind Mount Ida, the sight was so beautiful that it brought to his lips the opening of Horace's Ode I.ix: "*Vides ut alta stet nive candidum/ Soracte*,"[1] he murmured. Then, just as he trailed off, one of his captors came in to take the poem over, reciting the rest of its six stanzas. At this, the captive's startled eyes slanted down from the peak to meet those of his enemy, and, after a long thoughtful silence, he pronounced, "*Ach so, Herr Major*." For the captive was a German soldier—the commander of the island's garrison, no less. General Karl Kreipe (to give him his name) had been abducted on April 26, 1944 by a band of Greek guerrillas led by two English commandos. Over the next three weeks, the kidnappers picked their way across Crete, eluding the thousands of Nazi troops who hunted them, until eventually they were met by a British boat and whisked to Cairo, where Kreipe was handed over and the two commandos promptly awarded the D.S.O. One of these men was W. Stanley Moss, who in 1950 published a riveting account of the escapade, *Ill-Met by Moonlight*, later filmed by Michael Powell. The other was a certain Patrick Leigh Fermor. Disguised as a shepherd and (like Zeus in his Cretan boyhood) living largely in caves, he had spent much of the previous two years on the island organizing the resistance. Leigh Fermor it was who finished the quotation.

But where had he, who'd never completed high school, learned Horace so well? Had Kreipe asked him this, Leigh Fermor could have answered, savoring the irony, that he'd committed the odes to memory during his teenage *Wanderjahr* a decade earlier, when, just after Hitler's rise to power, he'd walked clear across Germany (among other countries) with a volume of Horace for his vade mecum, often reciting the poems to himself as he tramped. About that experience he'd not yet written a public word, and would not do so for many more years. Similarly he held off recounting his aubade with Kreipe. At last, however, in the 1970s, he broached the subjects of his continental traverse and, in an aside to that account, of his fleeting bond with Kreipe. Some things are best waited for: the book in which Leigh Fermor set these matters down, *A Time of Gifts* (1977), along with its sequel, *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), represent not only the capstone of his career but, in my opinion, the finest travel books in the language and a pinnacle of modern English prose, resplendent as Soracte or Ida in deep snow.

1 In J. V. Cunningham's translation, "See how resplendent in deep snow/ Soracte stands."

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The deplorable fact that most Americans, even well-read ones, have never even heard, as I also had not until recently, of a figure who in Britain (to say nothing of Greece, where he lives to this day) is revered and beloved as war hero, author, and bon vivant; who is, in Jan Morris's words, "beyond cavil the greatest of living travel writers"; and who, in those of the historian John Julius Norwich, "writes English as well as anyone alive"—all this spurs me to correct our oversight of the sublime, the peerless Patrick Leigh Fermor.

His turbulent early life is recounted in the introduction to *A Time of Gifts*. Shortly after his birth in 1915, his mother and sister went to join his father in India, while he was left behind "so that one of us might survive if the ship were sunk by a submarine." For four years he was billeted with a Northamptonshire farming family, an experience that proved "the opposite of the ordeal Kipling describes in *Baa Baa Black Sheep*." A halcyon period, this, but the taste for boisterous freedom he acquired in the fields made for trouble later on: "Those marvelously lawless years, it seems, had unfitted me for the faintest shadow of constraint." Especially intolerable to him were academic strictures of any kind, and there ensued a long series of dust-ups and expulsions, hilariously related. At ten he was sent to "a school for difficult children," among which misfits he lists

> the millionaire's nephew who chased motorcars along country lanes with a stick, the admiral's pretty and slightly kleptomaniac daughter, the pursuivant's son with nightmares and an infectious inherited passion for heraldry, the backward, the somnambulists . . . and, finally, the small bad hats like me who were merely very naughty.

As Leigh Fermor observes, "English schools, the moment they depart from the conventional track, are oases of strangeness and comedy."

That "conventional track" was given one last stab when he, having narrowly passed his Common Entrance exams, entered King's School, Canterbury. For a time all went smoothly, but soon he was back to raising adolescent hob. "'You're mad!,' prefects and monitors would exclaim, brows knit in glaring scrum-half bewilderment, as new misdeeds came to light. . . . Frequent gatings joined the miles of Latin hexameters copied out as impositions." (Today such a scapegrace would no doubt be diagnosed with A.D.D. and put on ritalin.) His housemaster, in a report, described him as "a dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness." The last straw was almost literally that, a vegetable transgression: he conceived a violent crush on a local greengrocer's daughter—a townie, as it were—and while his affair with this "sonnet-begetting beauty" never progressed beyond hand-holding, it was, once found out, too much for the school authorities. He was promptly sacked.

At loose ends, he went through the motions of preparing for Sandhurst. Soon, however, he slid into a dissipated life of partying with "the remainder, more or less, of the Bright Young People, but ten years and twenty thousand double whiskies after their heyday." He lodged with Beatrice Stewart, a friend and model to Sargent, Sickert, Augustus John, and others. "I had a vision of myself, as I moved in, settling down to writing with a single-minded and almost Trollopian diligence." But the ceaseless on-site bacchanalia put paid to his ambitions for the moment. Frustration mounted and was capped by despair. What to do next?

Then, at a stroke, he hatched a fantastic plan to "set out across Europe like a tramp—or, as I characteristically phrased it to myself, like a pilgrim or a palmer, an errant scholar, a broken knight or the hero of *The Cloister and the Hearth*!" (Helen Waddell's recently published *The Wandering Scholars* also must have fired his imagination.) On foot, he would follow a mostly riverine course, along the Rhine and then the Danube; and as for his final destination, it could

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only be Constantinople, as he persists in calling Istanbul. "These certainties sprang from reading the books of Robert Byron; dragon-green Byzantium loomed serpent-haunted and gong-tormented." By luck, he even managed a link with Byron when his friend Mark Ogilvie-Grant bequeathed to him the rucksack he had carried while accompanying Byron around Mount Athos. Thus talismanically kitted, he set sail for the Hook of Holland in December 1933.

To the Netherlands, soon crossed, Leigh Fermor devotes only a few pages. Here he documents that peculiar *déjà vu* provoked by moving through an intimate world that hundreds of Dutch canvases have faithfully adumbrated—of *being* in a painting:

> So compelling is the identity of picture and reality that all along my path numberless dawdling afternoons in museums were being summoned back to life and set in motion. Every pace confirmed them. Each scene conjured up its echo. The masts and quays and gables of a river port, the backyard with a besom leaning against a brick wall, the chequer-board floors of churches—there they all were, the entire range of Dutch themes, ending in taverns where I expected to find boors carousing, and found them.

Such reveries were brought up short by the sight of swastikas at the German border. Leigh Fermor's treatment of Germany, whose capacity for barbarism he later felt at close quarters, is remarkably even-handed. He never lets subsequent events retroactively embitter his memories of that winter, and is quick to acknowledge the praiseworthy aspects of German life, in particular the "old tradition . . . of benevolence to the wandering young," of which he gratefully took advantage. Still, there were hints of the catastrophe to come, as when, at some *Bierstube*, the talk would take a sudden, awkward turn:

> In all these conversations there was one opening I particularly dreaded: I was English? Yes. A student? Yes. At Oxford, no? No. At this point I knew what I was in for.
>
> The summer before, the Oxford Union had voted that "under no circumstances would they fight for King and Country." The stir it had made in England was nothing, I gathered, to the sensation in Germany. I didn't know much about it. In my explanation—for I was always pressed for one—I depicted the whole thing as merely another act of defiance against the older generation. The very phrasing of the motion—"fight for King and Country"—was an obsolete cliché from an old recruiting poster: no one, not even the fiercest patriot, would use it now to describe a deeply-felt sentiment. My interlocutors asked: "Why not?" "Für König und Vaterland" sounded different in German ears: it was a bugle-call that had lost none of its resonance. What exactly did I mean? The motion was probably "pour épater les bourgeois," I floundered. Here someone speaking a little French would try to help. "Um die Bürger zu erstaunen? Ach, so!" A pause would follow. "A kind of joke, really," I went on. "Ein Scherz?" they would ask. "Ein Spass? Ein Witz?" I was surrounded by glaring eyeballs and teeth. Someone would shrug and let out a staccato laugh like three notches on a watchman's rattle. I could detect a kindling glint of scornful pity and triumph in the surrounding eyes which declared quite plainly their certainty that, were I right, England was too far gone in degeneracy and frivolity to present a problem. But the distress I could detect on the face of a silent opponent of the régime was still harder to bear: it hinted that the will or the capacity to save civilization was lacking where it might have been hoped for.

Not even these omens, though, could dampen his surging enthusiasm. By Ulm, he was in full aesthetic ferment. The town's minster is remembered thus:

> The clustered piers, which looked slender for so huge a place, divided the nave into five aisles and soared to a network of groins and ribs and liernes that a slight architectural shrug would have flicked into fan tracery. But it was the choir-stalls that halted one. A bold

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> oaken outburst of three-dimensional humanism had wrought the finials . . . into the life-size torsos, in dark wood, of the sybils: ladies that is, dressed in coifs and wimples and slashed sleeves and hatted in pikehorn headdresses like the Duchess's in *Alice in Wonderland*. They craned yearning across the chancel towards Plato and Aristotle and an answering academy of pagan philosophers accoutred like burgomasters and led by a burgravial Ptolemy wielding a wooden astrolabe.

Then, in Munich, he became close with a family of exiled Estonian aristocrats, through them gaining entry to a rarefied network of Central European country-houses. Letters on his behalf were fired off to schlosses all along the way, and these missives "unloosed cornucopias of warm and boundless hospitality when I caught up with them." Hopping like a latter-day Rilke from castle to castle (and mildly reproaching himself for having abandoned his ideal of scroungy vagabondage), he glimpsed a whole genteel world teetering on the cusp of extinction. Here he is being regaled by a kindly old count in Austria:

> As I listened, the white gloved hand of the Lincoln green footman poured out coffee and placed little silver vermeil-lined goblets beside the Count's cup and mine. Then he filled them with what I thought was schnapps. I'd learnt what to do with that in recent weeks—*or so I thought*—and I was picking it up to tilt it into the coffee when the Count broke off his narrative with a quavering cry as though an arrow from some hidden archer had transfixed him. "NEIN! NEIN!," he faltered. A pleading, ringed and almost transparent hand was stretched out and the stress of the moment drove him into English: "No! No! Nononono—!" I didn't know what had happened. Nor did the others. There was a moment of perplexity. Then, following the Count's troubled glance, all our eyes alighted simultaneously on the little poised silver goblet in my hand. . . . His anxiety had been for my sake, he said apologetically. The liquid wasn't schnapps at all, but incomparable nectar—the last of a bottle of liqueur distilled from Tokay grapes and an elixir of fabulous rarity and age.

Further on, in Slovakia, he was hosted by the marvelously named Baron Pips, who put him on to Proust. In Budapest—we've now shifted, by the way, to *Between the Woods and the Water*—he caroused with the local *jeunesse dorée*; and when he set out across the Great Hungarian Plain, he found still more drawbridges lowering at his approach: "word of the hazard moving across the south-east Alföld [i.e., the Plain] must have got about and thank God I shall never know whether it loomed as a threat or a bit of a joke." Crossing into Transylvania, he found himself swept up into a strange quaint universe of Magyar squires, all chafing under the Treaty of Trianon, which had left them marooned in Romania.[2] "The prevailing atmosphere surrounding these kastély-dwellers conjured up that of the tumbling demesnes of the Anglo-Irish in Waterford or Galway, with all their sadness and their magic. . . . They lived in a backward-looking, a genealogical, almost a Confucian dream and many sentences ended in a sigh." His picture of this isolate elite, haunted by "phantoms of their lost ascendancy," is unforgettable, as witness the following inventory:

> All through the afternoon the hills had been growing in height and now they rolled into the distance behind a steep and solitary hemisphere clad to the summit with vineyard. We turned into the tall gates at the foot of it and a long sweep of grass brought us to a Palladian façade just as night was falling. Two herons rose as we approached; the shadows were full of the scent of lilac. Beyond the french windows, a coifed and barefoot maid with a spill was lighting lamps down a long room and, with each new pool of light, Biedermeier furniture took shape and chairs and sofas where only a few strands of the original fabric still

2 For a magisterial account of Germano-Romanian life in the same period, see *The Snows of Yesteryear* by Gregor von Rezzori (1989).

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> lingered; there were faded plum-coloured curtains and a grand piano laden with framed photographs and old family albums with brass clasps; antlers branched, a stuffed lynx pricked its ears, ancestors with swords and furred tunics dimly postured. A white stove soared between bookcases, bear-skins spread underfoot, and . . . a sideboard carried an array of silver cigarette-cases with the arms and monograms of friends who had bestowed them for standing godfather or being best man at a wedding or second in a duel. There was a polished shellcase from some Silesian battle, a congeries of thimble-sized goblets, a scimitar with a turquoise-encrusted scabbard, folded newspapers—*Az Ujság* and *Pesti Hírlap* sent from Budapest, and the *Wiener Salonblatt*, an Austrian *Tatler* full of pictures of shooting parties, equestrian events and smart balls far away, posted from Vienna. Among the silver frames was a daguerreotype of the Empress Elizabeth—Queen, rather, in this lost province of the former Kingdom—another of the Regent dressed as admiral of a vanished fleet, and a third of Archduke Otto in the pelts and the plumes of a Hungarian magnate. Red, green and blue, the squat volumes of the *Almanach de Gotha* were ready to pounce.

Despite their dislocation, these gentlefolk never failed to exude, he found, "charm and *douceur de vivre*." As spring ripened into summer, and as he pushed further into Romania, he joined in their gay round of parties and excursions. Also flings: this magic season culminated for him in a brief yet torrid affair with a married Hungarian woman, Angéla. Zipping around Transylvania in a touring car with Angéla and his friend István, his bliss was such that even the news of Dollfuss's assassination, filtering in from Austria, cast but a momentary pall. Finally he tore himself loose from this idyll, reverting to his hobo ways as he headed up into the Carpathians, where he became the guest, successively, of backwoods Gypsies and Jews. (A rabbi's bonhomie especially delighted him: "I had thought I could never get on friendly terms with such unassailable-looking men.") Descending from the mountains to the spa town of Baile Herculane to seek out a friend of István, he indulged in one last gilded frolic before sailing down a gorge of the Danube known as the Iron Gates, which is where the second volume ends.

It is difficult, even quoting extensively as I have, to convey the almost preternatural copiousness of these two books. There are disquisitions on everything from the *Landsknecht* (a Renaissance infantryman) to the *chibook* (a Turkish pipe) and everyone from the Jazyges ("an Iranian speaking branch of the Sarmatians mentioned by Herodotus") to the Uniats (a Greco-Catholic sect), from St. John Nepomuk to Vlad the Impaler; vivid evocations of Bavarian beerhalls, Slovak red-light districts, and countless other milieux; and razor-sharp, affectionate, often uproarious sketches of the oddballs Leigh Fermor met along the way. These include a Frisian Islander given to speaking garbled neo-Elizabethan—"Among good and luckless men," he warned, "there is no lack of base ones, footpads and knaves who never shrink from purloining"—and a Romanian count, famous as an entomologist, whose Scottish nanny had left him muttering things like "I hae me doots." Far from surfeit, the effect of so much muchness is a cumulative magnificence, building up in golden passage after golden passage.

Yet what of the more than forty-year gap between journey and tale? How can Leigh Fermor possibly *remember* all this? One answer is that he took extensive notes at the time, and has since retraced parts of his route. Another is that he's added a lot: there are great reams of learning here that not even the most precocious teenager can have mastered. But still. Wisely, he negotiates this narrative dilemma by ignoring it; never does he wring his hands and fret, in effect, "Well, admittedly I didn't know such and such *back then*." That he often embellishes, that he credits to youth what properly belongs to riper age, hardly needs acknowledgment, and so commandingly articulated is his point of view that one doesn't think to

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question it. In fact, this overlay of adult sensibility vastly enhances the account, investing it with a rich patina.

But it's the boy who predominates. Few writers catch as well as Leigh Fermor the raw jubilation of youth, and fewer still render it so infectious. As he advances into a deepening enchantment, so goes the reader headlong with him. Schlosses and minsters, barons and counts, Gypsies and Jazyges, Tokay and *chibook*: all contribute to the spell, yet what matters more is how all these are felt, the way each fillips along the boy's cultural education—his *Bildung*, if you will. Many books implicitly concern the windfall lessons of travel; these explicitly do. Their narrative treats, ultimately, of grace; it's the story of how Leigh Fermor put juvenile ignominy behind him and gained, in its place, mature knowledge and confidence.

This whole ameliorative dimension of *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*, combined with the profusion and sweep of their prose, makes the books, by the end, overwhelmingly beautiful and satisfying. Small wonder they've inspired younger writers—such as Jason Goodwin, author of *On Foot to the Golden Horn*—and pilgrims to follow in Leigh Fermor's tracks. When he finishes his trilogy, it will constitute one of the great sequences in modern literature. I gather that John Murray, Leigh Fermor's publisher, fields, on average, one call per week from a fan desperate to know when the last volume is expected.[3]

Leigh Fermor's activities over the next few years remain murky to me; he alludes to them here and there, but only vaguely. He took part, apparently, in an anti-royalist revolt in northern Greece, attaching himself to a cavalry regiment. According to his schoolday friend Alan Watts, the famous proponent of Zen, in this period he also "visited the monks at Mount Athos, which he discovered to be an elaborate homosexual organization, and then spent a year as the lover of a Rumanian princess." I'm unsure about the princess part, but it does seem that Leigh Fermor lived for a while—two years, in fact—with a family in Moldavia, until the war forced his departure. Post-bellum he began roving again, this time in the Caribbean and Central America, before eventually settling in the Peloponnese, where he lives with his wife in a house he designed and built (architecture being one of his main preoccupations).

His remaining works can be neatly halved: there are three full-dress travelogues and three minor productions. Of these latter, the earliest is a suave novella, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* (1953), which concerns a *Titanic*-meets-Mount Pelée disaster: during Mardi Gras, a volcanic Caribbean island erupts, then sinks, leaving one survivor. Next came *A Time to Keep Silence* (1957), a short volume about monasteries and my favorite of this group.[4] A sample:

> According to a rumour widespread in France, Trappist monks greet each other daily with the words: *Frère, il faut mourir*, and a mythical agendum in the duties of a monk is the digging of his own tomb, a few spadefuls a day. Another legend represents all Trappists as the authors of atrocious and undetected crimes, preferably the murder of their fathers and mothers, for which only the long penance of Trappist life can atone. Most sinister of all is the theory that the marshy country in which Cistercian monasteries are usually situated is chosen so that the vapours of the swamps may speed their inhabitants to an early grave. Even the name encourages such fables: the unwary traveller advances, the Trappe swings open, he drops into the dark, he is caught.

Last of the triad is *Three Letters from the*

3 John Murray keeps strikingly handsome cloth-bound editions of most of Leigh Fermor's books in print in England. Penguin does the same with paperbacks, but, inexplicably and unforgiveably, does not distribute them in the United States.

4 The book is back in print here from the Akadine Press as part of their notable A Common Reader series. The title can only be ordered direct (800-832-7323 or www.commonreader.com).

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Andes (1991), a very slight affair indeed and not particularly recommended.

As for the major books, *The Traveller's Tree* (1950) recounts Leigh Fermor's jaunt in the Caribbean. Though often superb, it falls short of his best European work; his manner somehow suits the New World less than the Old. Then there are his two prodigious books about Greece, *Mani* (1958) and *Roumeli* (1966), both of them stuffed to bursting with Hellenic arcana. *Roumeli* features some quintessentially Leigh Fermorian adventures, including visits to the Sarakatsáns, a mysterious nomadic people, and the Kravarites, a remote community of mendicants and hustlers who speak a private language ("the odd ethnological rock-pools of Europe" have always fascinated him), as well as an errand to Missolonghi to retrieve a pair of Lord Byron's shoes. Still, the clear choice here is *Mani*, Leigh Fermor's other flat-out masterpiece.

The Mani, a backward, hardscrabble region of the southern Peloponnese, would seem a tough row for a writer to hoe. But, like Norman Douglas in *Old Calabria*, Leigh Fermor turns up, in this unpromising place, a fine trove of history ("It is a little known fact, recorded in the *Wars* of Procopius, that Genseric, King of the Vandals, after he had conquered Carthage, purposed to invade the Mani") and folklore:

> Belief in the prophetic importance of dreams, a pan-Hellenic superstition, is even stronger here than in the rest of Greece. In Greece, one 'sees' a dream, but the exegesis of what one sees varies from region to region. In the Mani, in unconscious conformity with many modern theories, it goes by opposites. The dream-taste of sweetness or the sight of sweet things—cakes or a honeycomb, for instance—spell poison and bitterness; flowers mean sorrow . . . eggs—the symbol of paschal concord—foretell high words and a quarrel. . . . To have meaning, a dream must be short—a sort of illuminating flash. Long dreams are attributed to indigestion and discounted. . . . If a dream seems totally irrelevant it may be the case of a wrong address, as they are sometimes delivered by mistake to people with the same name as the true destinatory. The dreamer must try and find out the real addressee and hand the dream over.

Nancy Mitford, in a letter to Evelyn Waugh, once sniffed about Paddy (as he's universally known) "wasting his excellent language on Greek peasants." How dreadfully *déclassé*! True, he does sometimes wax rather misty over the manifold virtues of rural Greek character. But when sticking to custom he's crystalline:

> Often, from its inception, one is able to predict the whole course of a village conversation, what topic will unleash another, where the sighs and the laughter will come, the signs of the cross and the right hand displayed palm outwards and fingers extended in anathema; where heads will be shaken or the edge of the table struck in indignation with the index-finger doubled up. They unfold with the inevitability of ritual. . . . Many an hour of hilarity is really a long game of conkers and there is a strange pleasure for the experienced in observing the punctilio of stroke and counterstroke.

Along with this kind of hominess, there is, as ever, plenty of pyrotechnic display. One of Leigh Fermor's key obsessions remains Byzantium, which he can scarcely mention without a sigh of Yeatsian nostalgia. Even in *The Traveller's Tree*, he manages to stumble, in a Barbados churchyard, on the grave of Ferdinando Palaeologus, a seventeenth-century descendant of Constantine XI. The Mani provides far broader license for his Byzantine excurses:

> Very often, wandering in the wilder parts of Greece, the traveller is astonished in semi-abandoned chapels . . . by the subtlety with which the painter has availed himself of the sparse elbow-room for private inspiration that the formulae of Byzantine iconography allow him: a convention so strict that it was finally codified by a sixteenth-century painter-monk

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> called Dionysios of Phourna. He formalized the tradition of centuries into an iconographic dogma and deviation became, as it were, tantamount to schism. He it was who made the army of saints and martyrs and prophets identifiable at once by certain unvarying indices—the cut and growth of saints' beards, their fall in waves or ringlets, their smooth flow or their shagginess. . . . He regulated—it was more the ratification of old custom than the launching of new fiats—the wings that anomalously spring from the shoulder blades of St. John Prodromos, and placed his head on a charger in his hands as well as on his neck. He stipulated the angle at which a timely sapling, springing from the ground, should redeem the nakedness of St. Onouphrios from scandal.

Yet another of Leigh Fermor's hobbyhorses is costume, of whose history and lexicon he evinces a knowledge almost unseemly in a heterosexual male; clearly a fashion-plate himself, he can't resist cataloging the dress of everyone he comes across. In *Mani*, we are treated to a spectacular digression on two kinds of hats, the *gudjaman* and the *ishlik*, both worn by Phanariot hospodars in the Danubian principalities of the Ottoman Empire. "What is the origin of these sartorial freaks?," Leigh Fermor wonders aloud, then lets fly with conjectures that reach into Persia and Muscovy and that adduce, among others, Filarete, Piero della Francesca, and Pisanello—all by way of illustrating "the Byzantine passion for strange hats." We also hear of the *fustanella*, a white skirt once worn by Greek men:

> Under King Otto and Queen Amelia, the fustanella and all its attendant finery, with superbly Byronic costumes for ladies-in-waiting, was the official court dress. When he was Greek Minister in Paris the great Kolletis . . . would often wear it, and the Goncourt journals speak with admiration of his presiding fully-kilted over delicious banquets of *agneau à la pallikare*. . . . Wittelsbach eccentricity, and a touching loyalty to the country he adopted, impelled King Otto to affect the fustanella in Bavaria after his abdication. It is thus clad that we may think of him among the fir trees and neo-gothic pinnacles of Neuschwanstein and Hohenschwangau.

Finally there are, as always, remembrances of drinks past:

> The stone flags of the water's edge, where [we] sat down to dinner, flung back the heat like a casserole with the lid off. On a sudden, silent decision we stepped down fully dressed into the sea carrying the iron table a few yards out and then our three chairs. . . . The waiter, arriving a moment later, gazed with surprise at the empty space on the quay; then, observing us with a quickly-masked flicker of pleasure, he stepped unhesitatingly into the sea, advanced waist deep with a butler's gravity, and, saying nothing more than "Dinner-time," placed our meal before us. . . . Diverted by this spectacle, the diners on the quay sent us can upon can of retsina till the table was crowded. A dozen boats soon gathered there, the craft radiating from the table's circumference like the petals of a marguerite. Leaning from their gently rocking boats, the fishermen helped us out with this sudden flux of wine.

Almost as much toping goes on in Leigh Fermor as in Hemingway, and his wassails sound like far more fun than Papa's.

Of all the sweeping judgments one might pronounce on the literature of the century just departed, fewer can be ventured more confidently than that the British dominated travel writing. Admittedly, the term itself is baggy and unappealing; Leigh Fermor himself, as did his close friend Bruce Chatwin,[5] abominates it. But whatever one chooses to call the form, the British knack for it is undeniable. Consider first the many

5 Chatwin's latest biographer, Nicholas Shakespeare, describes Leigh Fermor as Chatwin's "last guru" and "a man of action and of knowledge to a degree that Bruce envied." Chatwin's ashes are buried near the Leigh Fermors' house.

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authors admired mostly for their peregrinations, even a short a list of whom surely must include (by order of birth) Norman Douglas, H. M. Tomlinson, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, Freya Stark, Robert Byron, Peter Fleming, Wilfred Thesiger, Eric Newby, Norman Lewis, Jan Morris, Colin Thubron, Bruce Chatwin, Jonathan Raban, and Redmond O'Hanlon. And now add those known chiefly for other work, but who've produced travel writing of note: Belloc, Maugham, Forster, Lawrence, West, Huxley, Ackerley, Pritchett, Waugh, Greene, Isherwood, Auden, and Durrell, to name only a few. It seems almost obligatory, in fact, for British men and women of letters at least to dabble in the genre, which ranges in nature from perilous exploration of Antarctica (Cherry-Garrard) or Arabia (Thesiger) to setting up adorable house in Provence (you know who), and in length from the brisk metropolitan sketches of Morris to the hulking immensity of West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

As for what makes the British so adept, such speculations are beyond the scope of this essay. I would remark, however, that the signal feature of their travelogues is an emphatic, often prickly individualism. (This extends even to studiously ignoring each other when they meet in godforsaken places. Just so, A. W. Kinglake greets another Englishman in the Sinai with no more than a tip of his cap, "as if we had passed in Pall Mall." In *Brazilian Adventure*, Peter Fleming shamefully confesses to having saluted a compatriot deep in the Amazon.) The impression of forceful and idiosyncratic personality is stronger with them, the attack more distinct. And of course the humor is matchless. Whether they purvey the imperious comedy of taking no guff from the natives or the gentler sort which derives from exposing their own blunders—Fleming, Newby, and O'Hanlon are self-skewering masters of ineptitude—British travelers can make the wretchedest, most hazardous trek seem an occasion for mirth.

Of these tendencies Leigh Fermor seems to me both the apotheosis and, in important ways, the opposite. Supremely independent and amusing he is, to be sure. But where the prevailing temper leans, by degrees, toward the skeptical, the tart, even the downright cantankerous—Douglas, Byron, and Raban (splendid writers all) are three very different examples of this—he is sanguine, cheerful, tolerant. At bottom he's an incorrigible romantic in several senses of that overtaxed word. It shows in his passionate exuberance; his love of pageantry and heraldry; his "minnesinger disposition" (as Iain Moncreiffe dubbed it); the dashing, gallant quality to everything he does and writes; and, above all, the free rein he gives to fancy and imagination. But Leigh Fermor's is a romanticism primarily of fact, which anchors his wildest fantasias and of which he possesses a stupefying store. Nor does there cling to his erudition the least stale whiff of pedantry or cant; his is the limber, rangy, magpie learning of the true autodidact, of a man who's never come within a mile of a university.

And then there's his prose. Unmistakable, without obvious antecedents, and fairly leaping off the page, the style of Patrick Leigh Fermor is a thing to make us mere hacks despair; for liveliness, momentum, and sheer, unfailing felicity of expression, there are few in the language to equal him. (Those of ascetic taste will find him purple. They are to be pitied.) At once relaxed and highly wrought, his prose moves to a cantering rhythm all its own and blithely flouts certain proprieties. No model for schoolboys, it is, to borrow Leigh Fermor's epithet for Robert Byron, "uncircumspect"—a prolix, run-on, spendthrift style, rife with exclamation marks and polysyndeton. It points up a basic yet crucial obligation of style in general: that it convey personality and point of view. What makes Leigh Fermor's style so remarkable isn't its flourishes of rhetoric or niceties of phrasing, choice though these may be, but how fully it bears out his robust character, how perfectly suited an instrument it is to him, and him alone.

Not only other writers may find them-

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selves humbled. Fellow ramblers too. Next to Leigh Fermor, who is able, at any point on the map, both to notice and to put into play so formidably much, one cannot help but feel somewhat lumpish and incurious, like a rank package tourist. Yet this soon wears off. At communicating pleasure he is nonpareil, and one quickly catches his fever. For me, he captures uniquely the excitement, meaning, and value of travel; one learns how to travel better by reading him.

Which isn't to suggest that he has little to offer the sedentary. Even if you rarely quit your couch and opine, with Emerson, that travel is a fool's paradise, you are bound to enjoy Leigh Fermor purely as a historian, albeit of eccentric stripe. His great subject, to the extent he can be said to have one, is, quite simply, Europe. Brought alive in his pages as in no others known to me are the continent's heroes and villains, courtiers and peasants, wars and *belles époques*, faiths, tongues, buildings, garments, even tools: a whole ramified civilization of infinite nuance and cross-currents. Also the landscape in which all this unfolds—not just nature, though certainly that, but a sort of peopled, transhistorical topography.

Quite a mouthful! What I mean is better shown than told, so I'll conclude by citing two last passages. Here's Leigh Fermor in *Mani*, watching a cruise ship pass offshore:

> The liner followed the same path as many a Phoenician galley and many a quinquereme; heading northward in the invisible groove of Harald Hardraada's ships, sailing shield-hung and dragon-prowed from the Byzantine splendour of Mickelgaard for grey northern fjords.

And here he is in *A Time of Gifts*, gazing out across Slovakia but ruminating on landscape generally:

> The shift of mountains and plains and rivers and the evidence of enormous movements of races gave me the feeling of travelling across a relief map where the initiative lay wholly with the mineral world. It evicted with drought and ice, beckoned with water and grazing, decoyed with mirages and tilted and shifted populations . . . steering languages, breaking them up into tribes and dialects, assembling and confronting kingdoms, grouping civilizations, channelling beliefs, guiding armies and blocking the way to philosophies and styles of art and finally giving them a relenting shove through the steeper passes.

The kind of mineral push, perhaps, that brings incongruously together, on a Greek mountainside, a German and an Englishman, communing at riflepoint over the verses of a long-dead Roman.

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Sadness balancing wit: Thackeray's life & works

by Brooke Allen

Throughout William Makepeace Thackeray's professional life, he was plagued by explicit and implied comparisons with his great contemporary, Charles Dickens. Thackeray was born in 1811, Dickens a year later. By the mid-1830s, when the callow young Thackeray was knocking at the doors of literary London, Dickens was already in possession of the stage, the established star of the coming generation and very much the man to be measured against. As the two men aged, their relationship, cordial on the surface, would remain uneasy: they found it impossible to be friends. Thackeray, despite occasional spasms of confidence in himself and his way of writing, too often felt himself the inferior artist, while Dickens, though he never lost his position at the head of the pack, was uneasily aware of the challenge. As Thackeray was to claim late in their careers, "He [Dickens] knows that my books are a protest against his—that if one set are true, the other must be false."

In this he was wrong, of course, for felt truth can be as powerful, or more so, than the intellectual variety. In any case the comparison is unfair and pointless, for the two authors were as unlike as chalk and cheese. But the final score must be decisive: Thackeray only produced one entirely successful novel, *Vanity Fair*, while Dickens never wrote a bad book; his was an extraordinary, almost superhuman achievement. There is a case to be made for *Vanity Fair* as the best English novel of the nineteenth century, but it does not outweigh, on its own, the riches of Dickens's output—*David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Dombey and Son*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *A Christmas Carol*, and all the others.

But Dickens was one of those great artists whose flaws were on as extravagant a scale as his gifts, and a significant number of readers have always been repelled by him. As D. J. Taylor writes in his new biography of Thackeray,[1] "A certain kind of late-Victorian middle-class home . . . found Dickens vulgar; a certain kind of late-Victorian intellectual found him incorrigibly sentimental. In both cases Thackeray was a highly acceptable substitute." This is true, and Taylor need not have limited his statement to the late-Victorian period. Thackeray was the anti-sentimentalist *par excellence*, to the extent that he was constitutionally unable to provide happy endings even for his most deserving characters in his most conventional novels; life itself provided no such happy endings, as he knew only too well. This tough emotional realism unfortunately earned him the label of cynic, a charge against which he fought throughout his life.

The issue of Dickens's vulgarity, and of Thackeray's cultivation of a deliberately gentlemanly style, is not really of any importance at all. Gentlemanliness is as irrelevant—and possibly even detrimental—to

1 *Thackeray*, by D. J. Taylor; Chatto & Windus, 509 pages, £25.

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great art as is the dubious advantage of good taste. Dickens, uninhibited by mere taste, was consistently to achieve a high emotional power that was far beyond Thackeray's reach. Yet Thackeray, to whose nature artistic excess was anathema, had compensatory qualities that eluded all other English novelists of the era, Dickens included. His very diffidence now appears, to our own age of moral relativism, an artistic strength. His muted, perpetually qualified style indicates a peculiarly modern lack of faith in rhetoric and absolutes. And his stance of gentlemanliness—understated, unobtrusive—is the outward sign of a refreshing unwillingness to assert himself too rudely, or to advance his own theories or observations as facts.

George Henry Lewes's brilliant review of *Vanity Fair* in *The Athenaeum* still stands, after more than a century-and-a-half, as one of the shrewdest assessments of Thackeray at the height of his powers.

> The style of *Vanity Fair* is winning, easy, masculine, felicitous, and humorous. Its pleasant pages are nowhere distorted by rant. The author indulges in no sentimentalities—inflicts no fine writing on his readers. Trusting to the force of truth and humour, he is the *quietest* of contemporary writers,—a merit worth noting in a literary age which has a tendency to mistake spasm for force. The book has abundant faults of its own . . . but they are not the faults most current in our literature. The writer is quite free from theatricality. No glare from the foot-lights is thrown upon human nature, exaggerating and distorting it. He is guiltless too—let us be thankful for such a boon in the sense here intended—of a "purpose." Unfettered by political or social theories, his views of men and classes are not cramped.

All true, and Lewes also grasped the fatal fault of both novel and author. Thackeray is deficient, he goes on to say, "in passion:—a deficiency that sits lightly on a satirist, but is serious in a writer of fiction. He has no command over this quality—apparently but little knowledge of it."

It is a hard and surely a wrong judgment of any man to surmise that he knows little of passion. But it is true to say that Thackeray's works are oddly deficient in the quality, and this lack can perhaps be blamed on the cultivation of gentlemanly detachment as opposed to uninhibited engagement. Thackeray, as Geoffrey Tillotson wrote, "saw the world represented in his novels as spectacle rather than as an arena in which the author and his personages interlock. He felt that Charlotte Brontë was too much embroiled in the moments as they came. He himself is not embroiled."

But if Thackeray was inhibited and emotionally constipated, he had a great deal to be inhibited and constipated about, and if his works suffer from a want of passion it is probably because his own tragic circumstances and the conventions of his era necessarily pushed passion onto the sidelines.

It was a sad life, one of enforced and undeserved emotional deprivation, and D. J. Taylor's sympathetic biography, while not providing much new material or even superseding previous works (Catherine Peters's excellent *Thackeray: A Writer's Life* was published in 1987, with a revised edition in 1999) provides a fine portrait of its contradictory subject: a high-spirited voluptuary forced into a life of unremitting labor; a uxorious family man forever denied marriage or acknowledged love.

Thackeray was born in Calcutta on July 18, 1811. His father, Richmond Thackeray, was a rising young official from a family prominent in the Indian Civil Service, his mother a beauty from another prominent Bengal family. Richmond Thackeray had not been Anne Becher's original choice; she had fallen in love back in England with Lieutenant Henry Carmichael-Smyth, an officer in the Bengal Engineers. But Anne's grandmother, who disapproved of the match, disposed of the suitor by telling Carmichael-Smyth that Anne no longer cared for him and informing Anne that her lover was dead of a fever. Anne departed for India, where she met and married Richmond Thackeray. And then

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one evening in 1812, not long after her son's birth, she was stunned to see Henry Carmichael-Smyth enter her drawing-room as a guest of her husband. Three years later Richmond Thackeray was dead of a fever, and Anne married Carmichael-Smyth with almost unseemly haste.

The effect these events had upon the novelist's life are hard to assess. Thackeray was only four when his father, of whom he was to retain almost no memory, died; Carmichael-Smyth was to prove a father and more than a father to his stepson until his death only two years before Thackeray's own. Still, it is a disturbing story, and it is hard not to agree with Taylor's belief that it influenced Thackeray's novels, which are "full of unheralded revenants—Amory, for instance, in *Pendennis*, whose wife has grown rich and married a baronet—and well-kept pre-marital secrets."

At the age of five, young Thackeray, like other Anglo-Indian children, was sent back to England to school. The little boy was predictably unhappy, first with relatives, then at school in Southampton, and later at Walpole House in Chiswick, which stood more or less as the model for Miss Pinkerton's Academy in *Vanity Fair*. The Carmichael-Smyths returned to England in 1820, and in 1822 the ten-and-a-half-year-old Thackeray enrolled at Charterhouse.

Thackeray, like his literary alter-ego Arthur Pendennis, was not a happy or successful scholar; as one contemporary remembered, "no one could in those early days have believed that there was much work in him, or that he would ever get to the top of any tree by hard activity." He deeply disliked the school, with its narrow, outdated curriculum and its headmaster, Dr. Russell, whom he was to lampoon years later in *Dr. Birch and His Young Friends*. "There are but 370 in the school," he wrote wistfully during his last year there. "I wish there were only 369."

At Charterhouse and later at Cambridge he quickly established "a routine that involved the minimum of work and the cultivation of his own interests." These consisted of the theater, with which he was obsessed, and of the production of hundreds of comical drawings burlesquing fellow-pupils, masters, literary characters, and theatrical personalities. He also applied himself to written parodies which, along with the drawings, were essentially rehearsals for his early journalism, his later triumphs like *The Yellowplush Papers*, and, eventually, the sort of episodic novel of which *Vanity Fair* is the great example.

Readers familiar with Arthur Pendennis's misadventures at "St. Boniface College, Oxbridge" will already have a clear picture of Thackeray's university career. Taylor points out, though, that Pendennis, "who cuts a considerable public dash, has his verses for the chancellor's poetry medal printed up in morocco bindings and enjoys cosy dinners with titled friends, is a much more conspicuous figure than Thackeray ever was. At the same time his debts are nothing like as great." Richmond Thackeray left his son a modest fortune of some £18,000, to be kept in trust until his twenty-first birthday. With the assurance of this legacy casting a rosy hue over his future, Thackeray, thrilled to exchange the spartan Charterhouse for Cambridge, threw himself into wine parties, dinners, the theater, rackety visits to Paris, cards (he was what would nowadays be called a compulsive gambler), sartorial excess, and (unlike Arthur Pendennis, denied such joys by the prudery of the Victorian reading public) casual sex. Although he read avidly, he more or less ignored the syllabus, took a fourth in the Tripos exam and a poor second in the Previous. An academic failure, he left Trinity College in June 1830—with no degree, heavy debts (he could not touch his legacy until his twenty-first birthday), and a gonorrheal infection that was to plague him for the rest of his life.

Thackeray needed a profession, and now accepted the fact that it would probably have to be the law. "I have thought a great deal on the profession I *must* take; & the more I think of it the less I like it—However I believe it is the best among the positive professions & as such I must take

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it, for better or worse." He accordingly enrolled with a Mr. Taprell in the Middle Temple, commenced a course of study even more desultory than the one he had pursued at Cambridge, and took rooms very like those in which Pendennis and his friend George Warrington read for the law.

Thackeray never scratched the surface of his chosen metier. After some months of study he was writing in his diary "I find I cannot read I have tried it at all hours & it fails—I don't know so much now as when I came to town & that God knows was little enough." Despairing of the entire project, he turned once again to his old enjoyments: "In a London made up of taverns and gaming-houses, theatres and print-shops, pleasure boats to Richmond and Greenwich, study assumed a low priority."

Late in 1833 Thackeray's fortunes, already uncertain, took a disastrous turn. The Indian banking houses in which most of his father's legacy was invested collapsed, and what remained of his capital vanished forever. "He was twenty-one and a half, and had squandered or had removed the best part of £20,000." How was he to live?

Law was clearly not an option, but by this time, Thackeray had begun to realize that his talents for caricature and burlesque might provide a living. He was still not clear as to whether his forte was to be art or literature, but he covered both fronts. He and his stepfather embarked on a short-lived career as newspaper publishers—no one has ever figured out how they raised the cash—and Thackeray began to study art in earnest, spending several months in a Paris atelier. His made his first real entry on the London literary scene in 1834, with a contribution to the lively magazine *Fraser's*.

It was at this juncture that Thackeray fell in love and his life took a tragic turn, sharply opposed to the rather low comedy that had so far marked it. His choice fell upon an immature seventeen-year-old named Isabella Gethin Shawe, who lived with her mother and sisters in a Paris boarding house. She was a passive, childish girl, in thrall to a domineering mother and afraid of claiming independence: "Reading the letters exchanged prior to the marriage," Taylor writes, "it becomes clear that a less tenacious man would not have got what he wanted." Thackeray's letters, admonitory, cajoling, gently bullying, outnumber Isabella's three to one.

> So, dearest, make the little shirts ready, and the pretty night caps, and we will in a few months, go & hear Bishop Luscombe read, and be married, and have children, & be happy ever after, as they are in the story books. Does this please you as it does me?

The tone, as patronizing as though addressed to a child and with a distinctly saccharine view of domesticity, is typical of Thackeray's attitude to his chosen mate. When he wrote of Isabella to others the adjective "little" often popped up, and "The sense that in choosing Isabella he had deliberately selected an immature intelligence he could form to his own design is sometimes rather too strong for comfort." But if Thackeray's ideas about marriage seem like pure fantasy at best, and at worst what many nowadays like to call patriarchal oppression, let it only be said that he was to be punished out of all proportion for his folly.

For the moment, though, he was happy: he had won his Isabella, after an epic struggle with Mrs. Shawe and, indeed, with the girl herself—for she seems to have been fully aware of her own intellectual and emotional shortcomings—and the couple embarked on married life in 1836 with a precarious income. But Thackeray was gaining confidence in his earning abilities. As the 1830s progressed he was established as a fertile and reliable source of comic and political writing. Thackeray had accepted the fact that he did not have the talent to become a first-rate painter but he knew his caricatures and illustrations were more than adequate: his first published "book" in fact was an 1836 pamphlet of eighty lithographed cartoons of ballet dancers called *Flore et Zéphyre*.

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The turning point came with *The Yellowplush Papers*, a series that ran in *Fraser's* throughout much of 1838. Its narrator, James de la Pluche, is "a gentleman's gentleman who trains his worm's eye view on the society in which his various employers operate"; the text, full of cockney malapropisms, sharp detail, and sly observations about social pretensions, is both an effective spoof of the etiquette books that were popular at the time and a forerunner of the way "society" would be depicted in *Vanity Fair*. *The Yellowplush Papers*, serialized in 1837, and *The Paris Sketch-Book*, published in 1840, established his reputation; he also published his first novel, *Catherine*, a take-off on the lurid Newgate crime novels then current, which was received without much enthusiasm. For this Thackeray could hardly blame his readers: he had chosen, he admitted, "a disgusting subject & no mistake."

Thackeray's family was growing. Anne, called Anny, was born in 1837; Jane, a year younger, lived only a few months. Thackeray responded to the death with a stoicism that would become fixed during the many hard years to follow. It seemed wrong, to him, to pray or to hold God responsible: "For specific requests to God are impertinencies I think, and all we should ask from him is to learn to acquiesce."

Money was tight and Isabella was proving to be a singularly bad housekeeper. She had always been passive and sluggish, and now spent more and more of her time in an ominous haze. The house was noisy and disorganized, and Thackeray began a lifelong habit of writing in clubs, inns, and public houses. Harriet Marian, whom her parents called Minny, was born in 1840, after which Isabella lapsed into what seemed to be a typical postpartum depression. But she did not get better, and soon she was suffering what Thackeray called an "extraordinary state of languor and depression." The doctor ordered sea air, and he took the family to Margate for a holiday they could ill afford. It was there that Isabella's state suddenly degenerated from depression to outright insanity. Walking on the beach with three-year-old Anny, she suddenly threw the child into the sea. Although Isabella soon came to her senses and fished her out again, it was a trauma Anny Thackeray never forgot.

Distraught over his wife's condition and the state of their finances, Thackeray accepted an advance from Chapman and Hall for a travel book about Ireland. He could leave Isabella and the girls with her family in Cork, he decided, while he traveled around the country in search of material. On the steamer from London, however, Isabella locked herself into the lavatory and jumped out of the window, and it was only by chance that, several minutes later, another passenger noticed her in the water: the air in her crinoline had kept her afloat.

She was determined to end her life, and it was with the greatest difficulty that her husband managed to get her and the children to Mrs. Shawe's. There he stayed for weeks, watching his wife deteriorate and chafing at the hands of his intolerable mother-in-law. The situation was desperate; he was down to his last twenty pounds, and Chapman and Hall had even required that he leave the family plate in their office as security for their advance. The only place he could turn for help was to the Carmichael-Smyths, now installed in Paris. They were warmly welcoming, but their funds were limited and the space was cramped; the presence of the Thackeray family, including the now fully demented Isabella, pushed everyone's resources to the limits. In her memoirs Anny Thackeray recalled one particularly awful day when a servant asked her father for money, causing him to change his last five-pound note "and we children were in one room crying and mamma was raving in the other."

Isabella could not be cared for at home. Thackeray placed her initially in a "Maison de Santé" outside of Paris; eventually, she would lodge with a private caregiver in England. Over the rest of her long life—Isabella was to outlive her husband by more than three decades—she never recovered her reason. What was really wrong with her,

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and how might she be diagnosed today? Taylor suggests a form of autism, but autism appears in early childhood, not in a grown woman who has all her life been more or less normal. A more plausible explanation is schizophrenia. Yet Isabella's granddaughter, Minny's daughter Laura Stephen (half-sister to Virginia Woolf), seems to have been autistic, and autism is an inherited condition.

At first Thackeray visited Isabella regularly, but as she was indifferent to him and sometimes even disturbed by his presence he eventually learned to keep away. He could never re-marry, of course, and since this was the Victorian age and Thackeray was not, socially at any rate, a nonconformist, he was never allowed to enjoy any sort of acknowledged love affair with a woman, either. He did fall in love: but his relationship with Jane Brookfield was in all probability unconsummated. It was a tragic impasse for a man who had so desperately longed for married bliss, and when Charlotte Brontë, who admired *Vanity Fair* extravagantly, dedicated *Jane Eyre* to her favorite novelist, Thackeray was bitterly aware of the irony: Brontë might not have been aware of the facts, but his situation was absurdly similar to that of her Mr. Rochester.

Thackeray was depressed but not self-pitying, for now as at all the crises of his life he was painfully convinced that the fault lay not in his stars but in himself. He prayed for help "to work out the vices of character wh. have borne such bitter fruit already." It is true that Thackeray had often behaved badly, and in pressuring the unwilling Isabella into marriage he had been both thoughtless and cruel—but how more than adequately he was punished for actions that were not vicious but merely foolish! It is beginning at this period that shame and remorse begin to seep into the fabric of his novels, giving them their characteristic disabused tone alongside their equally distinctive gentleness and tolerance. The critic Alexander Welsh noted with acuity that "Thackeray's Christianity differs from that of most Victorian writers, including Dickens and George Eliot: he believes more strongly in the possibility of repentance. . . . Thackeray . . . is a veritable student of botching and repenting." His extremely dubious "happy endings" are those where what little satisfaction the heroes find comes not through married bliss but instead from the exceedingly cold comfort of self-knowledge.

The next five years saw Thackeray struggling to support his family and keep his wife well cared for. Freelance work being what it always is, he found it a challenge, and during that period Anny and Minny had to remain in Paris with their grandparents while the novelist lived alone in cheap, bleak rooms back in England. He began two novels at this time, one of which, *The Great Hoggarty Diamond*, would eventually be completed and published. According to his friends he was consumed with an "awareness of what his marriage was costing him" and "the conviction that he was wasting his talents and that the great novel he believed he had within him—references to which start to crop up regularly in his letters—might remain permanently unwritten."

But his work was getting steadily more assured. *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* was published, with modest success, in 1844, and his association with a new magazine—"a very low paper," he called it in a letter to his mother, "only it's good pay and a great opportunity for unrestrained laughing sneering kicking and gambadoing"—now made his name famous at last with a wide reading public. *Punch* burst upon the scene with a tonic freshness, and Thackeray's particular style of satire suited it exactly. His work for *Punch* in the 1840s comprised the best of his journalism and sketch-writing: *The Snobs of England*, serialized in 1847 and brilliantly illustrated by the author, is still a source of great pleasure in its own right as well as being, as Taylor notices, "a series of rehearsals" for *Vanity Fair*.

With commercial success Thackeray was finally able to buy a house large enough for his family to join him: Anny and Minny,

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Major and Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, Thackeray's ancient grandmother Mrs. Butler, a governess, and servants could all be accommodated at the new establishment in Kensington. Here in 1846 the newly solvent Thackeray worked on *The Snobs of England* and on a new novel, not yet named *Vanity Fair*. He was "working every day, and yet not advancing somehow, and poor too—although everybody gives me credit for making a fortune." But poverty is a relative term. Thackeray never got so rich that he could stop worrying about the next contract and the next book: even in 1855, when he was an international celebrity, he commented dryly that "when I have written 2 more novels, for which I shall get 5000 £ a piece—why then, at 50, I shall be as I was at 21." But from this point his immediate, driving needs, and those of his family, were seen to.

Vanity Fair began serialization in January, 1847; it had been postponed so that it would not have to compete with Dickens's inevitably better selling *Dombey and Son*. The early numbers aroused interest without selling particularly well: there were suggestions of canceling it altogether, and Thackeray went out of his way to inject more suspense, most obviously by making a mystery of Becky Sharp's secret marriage. Taylor is of the school of thought that "the development of *Vanity Fair* was almost startlingly *ad hoc*." Many critics disagree—perhaps out of wishful thinking, an unwillingness to believe that such a masterpiece could have been planned in a haphazard fashion or that such crystalline characters might have changed quite drastically during the course of composition. But Thackeray was no modernist and would never have denied creating what Henry James denigrated as a "loose baggy monster." In any case, the looseness is almost the point of the whole thing: one of the joys of *Vanity Fair* is the sense that the author is discovering his characters alongside the reader, and that his opinion of them alters and develops as he writes.

It must be said, of course, that when his opinions alter it is for the worse and that the novel darkens as it progresses. George Osborne begins as a selfish and thoughtless but not bad-spirited young man; by the time he is dead ("with a ball in his odious bowels," as Thackeray remarked privately, with grim satisfaction), he is purely bad. At the outset of the novel Amelia is charming if lightweight; as life delivers its lessons and she learns nothing from them, her value sinks until by the end she is all but worthless. Even Dobbin, the novel's only fully admirable character, is hopelessly cheapened by the poor object on which he bestows the invaluable gift of his love.

Becky Sharp, one of the great characters of English literature, is a special case. Taylor speaks for a large proportion of readers when he claims that "*Vanity Fair* is not merely a 'novel without a hero'; it is also, at any rate covertly, a novel with a heroine." Others, without going so far as to call Becky the book's heroine, have noted the author's liking for her or at any rate a rare ambiguity in his treatment of a character who by all conventional standards is thoroughly rotten. It is true that not only Becky's craftiness but also her cheerful pragmatism and lack of malice—so long at least as her own interests are not threatened—are oddly attractive, and when she says, famously, that she thinks she could be a good woman on five thousand a year one feels almost ready to believe her. But the Becky who angles after Jos Sedley and charms Sir Pitt Crawley is a very different proposition from the Becky who neglects and mistreats her son, and it is with the birth of little Rawdon Crawley that Thackeray's affection for Becky noticeably withers. By the end of the narrative, with the broad hints that Becky has murdered Jos (and the illustration of her in the role of Clytemnestra) she has developed from engaging anti-heroine to an entirely evil woman.

Thackeray is hard on his characters, then, but he is not cruel; there is no last judgment in the novel. George dies a hero's death; Amelia finds satisfaction if not passion in her second marriage; Becky finally attains bourgeois respectability. Only Dobbin has the reflective powers to understand the

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irony of his own not-so-happy "happy ending:" that the prize he had spent the better part of his life in fighting for was not worth the taking.

In a wonderful essay on Thackeray called "The Method of Allusive Irrelevancy," G. K. Chesterton outlined the novelist's way of treating his characters and their manifold faults.

> No novelist ever carried to such perfection as Thackeray the art of saying a thing without saying it. Human life is (so to speak) so dense with delicacies, so thickly sown with things that are true and yet may be misunderstood, that this is a very valuable faculty in a man telling tales about men. . . . When Thackeray wished to hint a truth which was just not true enough to bear his whole weight, his way was to wander off into similes and allegories which repeated and yet mocked the main story like derisive and dying echoes. . . . In this connection it is specially unjust to call Thackeray a cynic. He falls away into philosophizing not because his satire is merciless but because it is merciful; he wishes to soften the fall of his characters with a sense and suggestion of the weakness of all flesh. He often employs an universal cynicism because it is kinder than a personal sarcasm. He says that all men are liars, rather than say directly that Pendennis was lying. He says easily that all is vanity, so as not to say that Ethel Newcome was vain.

That is exactly what made Thackeray so very attractive a figure: his acceptance of human frailty sets him apart from many writers, most particularly those of his own era. As Lord David Cecil observed, his particular gift "needs for its full expression moral tolerance." This he did not receive in Victorian England, which is perhaps why he tended to set his books in a more tolerant past—during the Regency period, as in *Vanity Fair*, or back to the eighteenth century and even beyond. "His genius, in fact," Cecil continued, "and his age, were always pulling him different ways. And he yielded to the age."

Yielded slowly, that is, and only after *Vanity Fair*. John Carey has characterized Thackeray's post-*Vanity Fair* career as "the history of a capitulation," and this is true. But a capitulation to what? To the spirit of the age, in part: as Thackeray grew older, more established, and more bourgeois, he became more conventional, or at any rate more accepting of other people's conventions. Starting in 1847 he was taken up by grand society, and as the years went by he spent more and more time hobnobbing with the rich and powerful, and far less in the bohemian company that had always stimulated his imagination. His critics accuse him of pandering to upper-class and bourgeois taste in his later novels, and there is some truth in the charge.

More serious, though, was the physical and emotional toll that his long push for fame and solvency, culminating in the huge effort of *Vanity Fair*, had cost him. Although large and powerfully built, Thackeray had never been a strong man. He was troubled by recurrent digestive ailments that his contemporaries blamed on his compulsive dining-out but that must almost certainly have been caused by some chronic illness, possibly Crohn's Disease. He was also plagued by a urethral stricture left over from the early bout with gonorrhea and was badly debilitated by a serious case of cholera. His long romantic friendship with Jane Brookfield, the wife of his friend William Brookfield, provided more frustration than relief, and it was broken off in 1851.

Pendennis had been published the previous year. It is an autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, Thackeray's answer to *David Copperfield*. While not a masterpiece like *Vanity Fair*, it is still on a very high level, one of the most rewarding of Victorian novels and now unjustly forgotten. One character in particular, the worldly old Major Pendennis, is sublime, on a par with almost any of Dickens's creations. Nevertheless, *Pendennis* marks the beginning of Thackeray's decline: it bears the marks, Taylor rightly notes, of "his efforts to adjust his temperament to the sensibilities of the

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people for whom he wrote," and its ultimate aesthetic effect is compromised by a reliance on what its audience expected from the fiction they read." The central romance between Pendennis and the insipid Laura Bell, in particular, is intolerable to anyone who knows the levels of ambiguity of which Thackeray was capable.

Thackeray had enjoyed writing *Pendennis*, but was tired and began to cast about for some money-making scheme that would not involve writing. Lecturing was an acceptable alternative—Dickens had made enormous sums in this way—and although he hated and feared the limelight, Thackeray thought he might do well to try his own hand at it. He prepared a series of talks on English humorists of the eighteenth century and despite his initial panic attacks, they proved a hit. They were not taken seriously by historians and intellectuals, however, and the irritable Carlyle remarked, "I wish I could persuade Thackeray that the test of a great man is not whether he would like to meet him at a tea-party."

The publisher George Smith had offered Thackeray generous terms for a new novel and now, with the eighteenth-century background fresh in his mind, he turned to the composition of *The History of Henry Esmond*, a narrative spanning the period from the Glorious Revolution through the reign of Queen Anne. *Esmond* has some interesting points: the central love triangle, involving Henry, his adoptive mother Rachel Castlewood, and her beautiful, imperious daughter Beatrix, is odd and incestuous enough to have disturbed a number of readers. On the debit side, though, the novel is stuffy and even ponderous. Catherine Peters criticizes "the suffocating blanket of Victorian respectability which weighs down the eighteenth-century action," and even Thackeray, as he later admitted to Trollope, found Esmond "a prig." His privately expressed opinion of the novel was that "it is clever but it is also stupid and no mistake."

In 1852, seeking a wider audience for his lectures, he headed for the United States. He enjoyed himself immensely, but the six months took their toll, and his exhaustion persisted. "Life was full of obligations: to write a book, to think about his next series of lectures, to eat a dinner or make his bow in somebody's drawing-room, to write or dictate the letters by which his social and professional life was transacted." The girls, quickly growing up now, required guidance that he did not always feel qualified to give them, and he went through a seemingly endless string of governesses. ("Unless I liked a Governess I couldn't live with her and if I did—O fie. The flesh is very weak, le coeur sent toujours le besoin d'aimer," he confided to a friend.)

He was nearly worn out when he embarked on *The Newcomes*, his last major effort, which Elizabeth Bowen later described only too accurately as "the shell of a great novel." But he needed the money. He was afraid that the novel would mark a "retreat"—"however if I can get 3000 £ for my darters I mean 3000 *to put away*. . . . I will go backwards or forwards or anyway." While *The Newcomes* displays the same high intelligence as *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, it is ruined by what Taylor calls "a creeping emollience" of which Thackeray, as ever, was gloomily conscious. By the time he began his next book, *The Virginians*—"a horribly stupid story," as he later called it—he had almost completely worn out his imaginative powers and his energy.

Thackeray's last important work was the founding, with the publisher George Smith, of the *Cornhill*, one of the great Victorian literary magazines. While his own powers were on the ebb, he was an effective figurehead and, his susceptibility to pretty female contributors notwithstanding, a good editor as well: his choice for the magazine's first full-length serial fell on the young Anthony Trollope, who provided *Framley Parsonage*, the novel that made his name.

"I have outlived my health, popularity and inventive faculties," Thackeray wrote in 1860, at the age of not quite fifty: he was being brutally honest, as he always was when he looked at himself. He still

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wrote—*Philip* was serialized in Cornhill in 1861–2, and *Denis Duval*, unfinished at the time of his death, was in the future—but he readily admitted that "the novel writing vein is used up through and through" (to which his lifelong friend Edward FitzGerald commented, "it is a pity he was not convinced of this before") and told friends that if he were not obliged to do so for financial reasons, he would never take up his pen again. His letters became increasingly valedictory, and he seemed disinclined to take a stand against the premature death that was obviously stalking him. "I wouldn't care to travel over the ground again," he wrote: "though I have had some pleasant days and dear companions." On Christmas Eve, 1863, he was found dead of a stroke, aged only fifty-two.

Although Thackeray had been in manifest decline, his death shocked literary London, and there was a huge turn-out of writers and artists at his funeral, including Browning, Trollope, Millais, John Tenniel, Henry Mayhew, G. H. Lewes, and Dickens—visibly distressed. The obituaries were deeply affectionate, as were the diaries and letters of his friends as they reflected upon his life. "He had many fine qualities," wrote the prickly Thomas Carlyle, whose friendship with the novelist had not always been smooth: "no guile or malice against any mortal: a big mass of soul, but not strong in proportion: a beautiful vein of genius lay struggling about him—Poor Thackeray, adieu, adieu!"

The daughters over whose future Thackeray had long fretted both had happy lives, although Minnie's was to be a short one. She married Leslie Stephen; their daughter Laura was born in 1870, and Minnie became pregnant again, but both she and the new baby died shortly before its birth. Anny Thackeray, her father's greatest friend, became the keeper of his flame and wrote introductions to his work. At the age of forty she married a cousin, Richmond Ritchie. She produced two children, enjoyed a distinguished career as a novelist, was the friend of many eminent writers and artists and as an old lady was the model for Mrs. Hilbery in her step-niece Virginia Woolf's novel *Night and Day*.

D. J. Taylor's biography makes a good read, but it is not really a *necessary* book. Although slightly longer and more detailed than Catherine Peters's life of the novelist, it is noticeably less acute. It offers no new interpretations of Thackeray's work, for Taylor does not aspire to write a critical biography: "critics criticise, biographers write biographies," he insists. And it ultimately fails in its stated purpose, "to demonstrate that [Thackeray] was the greatest English writer (writer, you note, not novelist) of the nineteenth century. And perhaps of all time." I did not believe this before reading the biography, and I found nothing in its pages to change my opinion.

But—as is not always the case with writers—to know about Thackeray's life is to enrich one's feeling for his work. On a first reading of *Vanity Fair* its sparkle and wit simply overwhelm the reader; it is one of the funniest books ever written. Coming back to the novel in later life, and with a knowledge of Thackeray's personal struggles, the book's sadness overwhelms or at least balances the wit: the sense of lost chances and love squandered, of moral slackening, personal disgust, and the hopelessness of poor, dissatisfied, and disappointed humankind is realized in a manner that has seldom been equaled. Let Thackeray himself have the last word:

> I want to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story [he wrote to a sympathetic critic]—we ought all to be with our own and all other stories. Good God don't I see (in that may-be cracked and warped looking-glass in which I am always looking) my own weaknesses wickednesses lusts follies shortcomings? . . . You have all of you taken my misanthropy to task—I wish I could myself: but take the world by a certain standard (you know what I mean) and who dares talk of having any virtue at all? . . . In fact I've a strong impression that we are most of us not fit for—never mind.

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Emmanuel Chabrier & French musical tradition

by James F. Penrose

The works that produce the most traceable effects in the subsequent history of an art are not always those which come to be regarded as epoch-making.
—Donald Francis Tovey

Perhaps the most productive midlife crisis in the history of music began in early March 1880 with a sly little note written by a low-level bureaucrat to his superior at the ministry of the interior in Paris. "Monsieur," it began, "personal matters require my presence in Bordeaux. I would be most grateful if you would permit me three days leave from the Ministry that I might settle my affairs." There were, however, no *affaires d'intérêt* in Bordeaux or anywhere else in France, as the writer then smilingly admitted.

> The above explanation is just for the file! Now, because I never lie and because for this reason I have been well regarded by my superiors, I will, just between us, tell you the real truth: for the last ten years . . . I've been dying to see *Tristan et Yseult* by Richard Wagner. It can only be seen in Germany . . . and it will be given in Munich this Sunday. . . . I beg you to forgive this administrative escapade . . . [but] I'll be back in the office no later than Wednesday morning.

Along with a small group of friends, the bureaucrat traveled to Munich for a matinee performance of *Tristan*. One of the group, the composer Paul Duparc, would write that his companion was overcome at the beginning of the opera and that he later returned to his hotel without saying a word. Recovering his spirits on the journey back to Paris, he had been made a decision. Back as promised on the Wednesday, he resigned his position eight months later, two weeks after his nineteenth anniversary at the ministry. In his remaining years, the now ex-bureaucrat devoted himself to composition. Largely self-taught, he completed three operas, various operettas, thirty songs, piano pieces, and a small number of orchestral works. When not composing, he supported his wife and sons as a chorus master and music critic.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, French music was having its own midlife crisis. Having largely ignored the heroic music of Hector Berlioz, far and away the great French composer of the first half of the century, the public, in particular the opera-going public, was torn among the "grandiose boredom" (Debussy's phrase) of Meyerbeer, the Italian *bel canto* school, and a particularly virulent strain of Wagnerism. In the midst of this turmoil, the bureaucrat created a musical style and language that served as an antidote to Wagner's influence and provided a foundation for the future of French music. Those who consider Debussy, Ravel, Milhaud, and Poulenc as among the twentieth century's masters of form, clarity, and expressiveness have this man to thank, as they themselves did fervently thank Emmanuel Chabrier.

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Aside from the blockbuster *España*, Chabrier's works have never established themselves in the repertoire. His writing is strikingly individual, avoids easy classification, and has tended to be avoided by musicians assembling concert programs. And it has a deceptive simplicity, which caused its dismissal by other musicians. When Chabrier finished his *Trois Valses Romantiques* for two pianos, he wrote to the composer Paul Lacome de l'Estalenx: "The girls who play the piano seriously (need I say how ugly they usually are) will be sure to ask for them. Oh! They'll soon calm down when they've read them!" Chabrier found his inspiration in odd places. He once considered a libretto based on a novel by Sacher Masoch. He wrote innocent, anthropomorphic songs about pigs, ducks, and turkeys, but was equally happy creating musical settings for drunkenness, sexual innuendo, and even torture with captivating charm.

By day, Chabrier was typical of his occupation and class. A short, heavyset *fonctionnaire*, he every morning left his apartments near the Gare St. Lazare for a brain-deadening job in the ministry's document-engrossment division; he supervised the preparation of its official orders, directives, and circulars. He was sufficiently well-regarded that he was asked to join the government-in-exile during the Franco-Prussian War. Outside the ministry, however, Chabrier hardly matched the bureaucratic ideal. He was an exceptionally witty if ribald conversationalist welcome at numerous salons, a singular pianist, and an avid collector of paintings by his unfashionable ("afflicted with some hitherto unknown disease of the eye," as one contemporary described them) friends, including Manet, Sisley, and Monet. Chabrier knew Gounod and Saint-Saëns, who patronized him as a "weekend musician," and Franck and D'Indy, who called him "*l'ange de cocasse*"—"angel of wit."

Despite his larger-than-life personality, Chabrier hardly led the life of the romantic buccaneer (though, at least as regards his love life and drinking, there is a dissenting view). He was a "*bon père de famille*." In his life, as in his music, there are few heaven-storming campaigns or earth-shattering resolutions. On resigning from the ministry, for example, Chabrier did not chase his wife around the table with a knife, set fire to her hair, or abandon her in favor of lovers of both sexes (as did his friend Verlaine), he merely pursued a second career with the same quiet diligence as his first. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that Chabrier has not been well served by biographers.[1]

Then there is the complication of his alleged Wagnerism. No composer working in the last quarter of the nineteenth century could fail to be affected by Wagner's works, so devastating and pervasive. His influence was particularly felt in France, and Chabrier has the reputation as the most Wagnerian of French composers. But his debt to Wagner has been consistently overstated. He was strongly influenced by Wagner's ability to create an emotional atmosphere, and he viewed Wagner's works as among the highest accomplishments of art. Nevertheless, this influence was much more on the *plots* of Chabrier's operas than on the music. In comparison to the plundering of the Wagnerian idiom by Chausson, D'Indy, Bruneau, Reyer, and even Fauré, it is Chabrier's voice, not Wagner's, that rings through his music. It is a great irony that while Chabrier did so much to further Wagner's music in France, he was instrumental in showing his compatriots how to escape its hypnotic effect.

In every form, Chabrier captivates with his wit, thematic ideas, tonal colors, rhythmic variety, climactic impulses, and harmonic daring. His moods range from naïve to bewitchingly complex, from tranquil to ecstatic. Chabrier's music resembles little that preceded it, but we hear its echoes in much that followed. Chabrier is the link between the romanticism of Berlioz and the "impressionism" of Ravel and Debussy.

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1 This situation has been addressed with the recent publication of Roger Delage's excellent and penetrating *Emmanuel Chabrier* (Fayard, FF350).

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An only child, Emmanuel Alexis Chabrier was born in January 1841 in the remote town of Ambert in the Massif Central. Located at the apex of a triangle whose other points are Vichy (to the north) and Clermont Ferrand (to the northwest), Ambert these days seems to be much the same as when Chabrier wrote that he would certainly "die of boredom there within the week." The family had been established in Ambert for generations, acquiring a reputation, rather jarringly for a line of churchmen and lawyers, as high-strung and eccentric. The Chabriers appreciated their son's obvious musical gifts in a drawing-room sort of way. They sent him to one Manuel Zaporta, a Spanish refugee, for music lessons. He was the first in a line of obscure musicians from whom Emmanuel pieced together his learning. He made such progress that Zaporta told the couple that their son had the potential for a musical career. Nothing could have interested them less.

Music (and the stage generally) was not a remunerative profession save for the very few. Composers as great as Schumann and Berlioz supported themselves by journalism. Chopin made far more from piano lessons than from his music. Social respectability was another issue: entertainment had more than a whiff of the bohemian and the licentious. Class, convention, and the dictates of financial security required that Emmanuel follow his father and grandfather in the law. Music was something to be enjoyed after the serious work of the day was concluded.

In 1856, the Chabriers moved to Paris where Jean Chabrier became a railroad litigator. Emmanuel took his *baccalauréat ès lettres* in 1858 before attending law school at the University of Paris. He also made initial contact with the Parnassians, the post-romantic literary movement that, along with the Impressionist painters, would so strongly influence his work. By the time he started university, Chabrier had published three compositions, and his two years at the *Faculté de droit* were noteworthy for the efforts he made to avoid the *Code civil*. He studied string technique with the little-known violinist Richard Hammer and harmony with Théodore Semet, the timpanist at the Opéra. In late 1861, Chabrier found a position, probably through his mother's family contacts, in the ministry of the interior. It was no easy transition to bureaucracy, however. That March, Wagner's *Tannhaüser* had been premiered at the Opéra. Though dog-whistled off the stage after three performances, *Tannhaüser* affected Chabrier so deeply that he spent months copying out the score.

After joining the ministry, Chabrier continued to mix with musicians and writers and painters including Degas and Fantin-Latour. He was a regular at the Parnassian salon of the Marquise de Ricard along with Verlaine, Leconte de Lisle, Banville, Catulle Mendès, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. They were the artistic and literary avant garde, and Wagnerians to a man. In those days, the interest in Wagner had to do with not only his music, but also his theories concerning musical drama, the creative process, vegetarianism, animals and, unfortunately, other more notorious subjects. When not socializing, Chabrier spent his time in galleries and museums and in finishing his formal training with Aristide Hignard, a Prix de Rome finalist whose opera, *Hamlet*, was overshadowed by that of Ambroise Thomas, one of the then-reigning majesties of the Opéra. (Only partly out of loyalty to Hignard, Chabrier later acidly observed that, "There are three types of music: good, bad, and Ambroise Thomas's.") His great friend at the time was the brilliant and twisted Paul Verlaine. It was Verlaine who first stimulated Chabrier to compose in larger forms.

While Chabrier would eventually fall out with Verlaine (possibly around the time the poet dropped his three miscarried siblings, preserved by his mother in jars, from the window at 26 rue L'Ecluse), the two were close friends for several years. They collaborated on two operettas, *Fisch-ton-Kan* ("Move It!" 1863) and *Vaucochard et Fils Ier* (1864). Chabrier later recycled Verlaine's

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macabre "*Couplets de Pal*" ("Impalement Verses") from *Fisch-ton-Kan* into his wonderful comic opera, *L'Etoile* (1877).

The plot of *L'Etoile* centers on King Ouf I who annually celebrates his birthday by treating his subjects to the spectacle of a public execution. Sentence is administered by means of an armchair that impales the occupant through the seat (*very* Verlaine!). Scored for orchestra, soloists, and chorus, Verlaine's verses originally began:

> The stake! The stake!
> Is, of all punishments,
> The greatest,
> *And the richest in delights!*

If there was a line to *épater* a bourgeois audience, this was it, especially as the scene progresses to a description of the nuances of impalement set to a beguiling waltz. It is hardly surprising that Chabrier's librettists diluted Verlaine's smiling nastiness by substituting "And the least delightful" for the last line. The "*Couplets*" is but one of the high points of a very funny work. Though some ensembles, like the Shop Assistant's Quartet, the Tickle Trio, and the Peddler's Rondo, come perilously close to slapstick, Chabrier's infectiously clever writing never goes over the edge; the ardor of arias like "*O petite étoile*" and the loving sincerity of the "*Couplets de mari*" are moving indeed.

As it turned out, though, *L'Etoile* was a leading indicator of Chabrier's terrible luck. It was premiered in November 1877 at the Bouffes-Parisiens, the theater where so many of Offenbach's operettas were successfully staged. *L'Etoile* was well-reviewed and well-received. It ran for forty-eight performances and then abruptly closed when one of the lead singers fell ill. Eventually edged out of the repertoire by Lecocq's and Offenbach's works, it was never again to play during Chabrier's lifetime. It is seldom performed, even now, despite its wealth of charm and its delightful music.

Une Education Manquée ("A Wasted Education") is a tiny operetta composed in 1879. Running scarcely forty-five minutes, it is very much in the slightly prurient bouffes tradition, with the difference, as noted by Francis Poulenc, that it is musically superior to any other. The plot centers on the predicament of a well-educated young man on his wedding night: well-educated, that is, except in one area. When Gontran de Boismassif, the leaden-named hero, asks his clueless tutor, Pausanius, for advice, the tutor displays his ridiculous academic credentials (heliography, agronomy, geodesy, etc.), but cannot help Gontran solve his most immediate and urgent need—though the ending is satisfactory for all concerned. *Une Education Manquée* can be seen as a sly parable about the composer's own situation: musically uneducated by the standards of the day, he still gets the job done. Chabrier's views of his place in the French musical establishment were not restricted to mere allegory. When the once famous but now almost forgotten Benjamin Godard patronized Chabrier by remarking what a *shame* it was that he "had taken up music so late in life," justice as dispensed by Chabrier was swift and terrible: "And even more of a shame that *you* took it up so early."

Chabrier's comic opera *Le Roi Malgré Lui* ("King Despite Himself") was the subject of another peculiar reversal: despite a successful 1877 premiere, the theater burned down after just three performances. The loss was particularly galling because, despite its complicated plot, *Le Roi* contains music of extraordinary brilliance and harmonic audacity. The startling prelude, the effervescent ensemble work of the first act, the gigantic sung waltz (*Fête polonaise*) at the start of the second, the barcarolle and sextette in the third, its witty musical allusions, and its overall brilliance simply cry out for revival. *Le Roi* deeply affected Maurice Ravel who believed that the work changed the course of French music. He said that he would have preferred to have written *Le Roi* than the *Ring*.

In the late 1860s, Verlaine introduced Chabrier to the salon of Nina de Callias. A fine pianist and charming hostess, she had

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separated from her scapegrace, absinthe-addicted husband shortly after marriage and consoled herself by entertaining talented young men. "There's no need for evening dress with me," she would say to a potential conquest. Her Parnassian salon was characterized in the Goncourts' *Journal* as an "*atelier de détraquage cérébral*." She was painted by Manet and memorialized in various *romans à clef* including George Moore's *Memoirs of My Dead Life* and the almost incredibly obscene *La Maison de la Vielle* by Catulle Mendès. Nina de Callias introduced Chabrier to Edouard Manet who would become the greatest friend of his life.[2] The composer wrote his first "impressionistic" work, the elusive and shimmering *Impromptu*, for Manet's wife. He also met Mendès, described by Delage as a "thoroughly accomplished master of the disgusting art of ambiguity," who provided Chabrier with the libretti for his operas *Gwendoline* and *Briséïs*. An ardent Wagnerian, Mendès's enthusiasm for the master continued unabated, even, in the very best of card-carrying traditions, after Wagner seduced his wife.

Richard Wagner had much the same effect on music that Karl Marx had on political economy. Both were utopians who savagely attacked the existing order. Both had a supreme sense of self-importance unleavened by anything resembling a sense of humor. Both had messages of simple and permanent appeal: universal equality (Marx), universal libido (Wagner).[3] Both expressed their philosophies in treatises of hideous and intractable tedium. Both had supporters and detractors united only by the degree of their ferocity. Most importantly, the effect of each on generations to come would be, in many respects, disastrous.

Wagner used a "black box" system that only he could manipulate. Composers of the day who tried to follow his methods, at least as they understood them, produced works that were doomed to be of interest only to musicologists. With its raw emotion and unrestrained eroticism, Wagner's music was like some sort of addictive drug to audiences who had never dreamt that an orchestra and singers were capable of inflaming them so. The innate power of the music was heightened by appearing at a time of considerable political, economic, and artistic upheaval. "In every period of spiritual anarchy," wrote one Wagnerophobe, "there always appears one of those gnosticisms which serve as a religion for those who no longer have a religion." France was particularly *mordue*. Wagner societies flourished, armies of Parisian intellectuals marched on Bayreuth, and periodicals like *La revue wagnérienne* were dedicated to a movement which, over time, had less to do with music and more to do with idolatry. Very few recognized the threat. César Franck scored the word "poison" across his manuscript copy of *Tristan*, while Berlioz excoriated the work in his review.[4] Years later, Igor Stravinsky (whose compositional and interpretive theories had their own significant effects) analyzed the problem by noting that as Wagner had so clearly broken with tradition, Wagnerism had, by definition, no tradition to continue. For all its undeniable force, Wagner's music was sterile and outside the mainstream. At the time, however, nobody much cared. Everyone wanted to compose like Wagner.

There were, however, small pockets of resistance. The Société Nationale de Musique was founded in 1871 to foster the

2 Though Manet almost certainly did not die in Chabrier's arms, as some biographies claim, Chabrier did unsuccessfully try to buy the plot next to Manet's in the cemetary at Passy.

3 One need only recall the line in the novel *La Lueur sur la cime* where one character said that hearing Wagner's music gave one "*une envie excessive de vous embrassez à fond*."

4 Some, of course, remained blissfully oblivious. Léo Delibes told a disgusted Vincent D'Indy that he loved the second act of *Parsifal* because "*il y avait des petites femmes, et . . . les petites femmes c'est toujours amusant*."

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cause of *ars gallica*. But it was individual, not institutional, action that was most necessary. Chabrier began chipping away at the cult of Wagner by basing his works—even those that borrowed from Wagner's orchestral technique—on classical, even antique, tonality, by preserving a strong melodic line, and by using a generous number of dance rhythms. Chabrier's dissonances, in anticipation of those of Debussy and Fauré, are often unprepared and unresolved, while his use of chromaticism and exotic rhythms and scales, particularly in his Spanish-influenced pieces, was novel. Above all, Chabrier sought to charm his listeners, rather than overwhelm them with a first-degree emotional assault. He did so with humor, simplicity, and freshness: all personal characteristics and also the traditional qualities of French music. As Chabrier himself wrote, "I want to be of my country—it is my first duty! I am trying to inoculate myself with the . . . aesthetics of the Man of Bronze [Wagner], *but never with his music*." It is eye-rollingly ironic, therefore, that Chabrier's works were refused performance for so long on account of their alleged Wagnerism.

While every composer has his influences, Chabrier's case is unusual in that his own were more literary and artistic than they were musical. Chabrier was hardly a "musician's musician." "He was not a man to construct a scholarly sonata, or lead a fugue to its happy end," in the words of one writer. His highly individual works seem to derive from the unfettered expression of his personality, one largely formed by his nonmusical interests. As a youth, he seriously considered painting as a career. As an adult, he was friendly with some of the greatest artists in history, so much so that he spent the evening drinking with Pissarro and Renoir after leaving the interior ministry for the last time. And, as a collector, he showed an unerring eye for quality. He was also the great autodidact of French musical history, and the visual aspect of his artistic formation was the basis of his musical imagination and his independence from the force of Conservatoire tradition.

While the Munich performance of *Tristan* certainly influenced Chabrier's decision to change careers, an even more powerful prod may have been the completion of his great piano suite, the *Dix Pièces Pittoresques*. The ten individual works that comprise the suite are not program music in the sense that Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* were thought to be programmatically inspired by actual paintings, but are "pictorial" in their use of tonal color and their pronounced sense of mood. Auguste Renoir's famous 1882 conversation in Palermo with Wagner about "*des impressionistes de la musique*" almost certainly referred to this singularly impressionistic work. The *Pièces Pittoresques* are not especially pianistic—their unusual rhythms, demanding tempi, and unexpectedly shifting tonalities and inflections make them challenging to play. Each *Pièce* is a colorful setting of mood and atmosphere. "It is fatal to be boring," Chabrier wrote to his publisher. "I prefer having ten colors on my palette and mixing each tone. . . . Never the same hues!" In "*Sous-bois*," the fourth of the *Pièces*, Chabrier's writing suggests the rustling leaves and shifting light and shadows of a warm country afternoon. In "*Idylle*," the sixth, Chabrier creates a *pointilliste* landscape that changed the life of Francis Poulenc when he happened to hear a recording of the work while walking down the Boulevard d'Italiens. "Today," Poulenc wrote in 1961, "I still tremble with emotion thinking of the miracle that happened then; a new harmonic world opened up before me, and my own music has never forgotten that first lover's kiss." When several of the *Pièces Pittoresques* were performed at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique, César Franck, who was present, said, "We have just heard something exceptional. This music links our own time to that of Couperin and Rameau."

It is ironic that Debussy and Ravel, popularly thought to be *the* Impressionist composers, were actually far less involved with the original Impressionists than Cha-

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brier. He was strongly influenced by these painters' concepts of atmosphere and mood. Indeed, it is this particular attribute of Chabrier's music that is the strongest link to Wagner. The resemblance between Impressionism and Wagner's music was noted by the critic Jules Laforgue when he compared the "thousand dancing touches of color," in an Impressionist exhibition to the *Waldweben* ("forest voices") scene in *Siegfried*. As the musicologist Christopher Palmer pointed out, Wagner "was the first to take advantage of the remarkable wealth of color obtainable from the orchestral families when they were intermingled freely like colours on a painter's palette."

Chabrier was not completely without means after he left government employment, but he was not well off. He was a well-known, if somewhat marginal, figure in the Paris music world. He had enough of a reputation, however, for Charles Lamoureux, one of the great conductors of the time, to hire him as his secretary and chorus master. Chabrier assisted Lamoureux in the preparation and performance of much new music, particularly Wagner, and these performances were attended as sacerdotal rites by the Wagner-crazed. In return, Lamoureux conducted many of Chabrier's compositions for the first time.

In 1882, Chabrier and his wife left Paris for an extended visit to Spain. He found there the lively inspiration for his *Habanera* (1888) and, of course, his symphonic rhapsody *España* (1883). Chabrier was much amused while composing the latter, writing to his publisher that its themes were sung to him by a gypsy girl who demonstrated its rhythms with her "undulating hair, clicking heels, and arching rear." An immediate hit, *España* would receive the ultimate, if unintentional, accolade: muzak-ization by Emile Waldteufel in the form of a waltz suite that rendered its crackling rhythms and dissonances safe for ballroom use.

In 1883, Chabrier finished his *Trois Valses Romantiques* for two pianos. (They were subtitled *La cocotte* ["The Tart"], *La grosse allemande* ["Fat Frau"], and *La belle juive* ["Beautiful Jewess"], but the captions, not surprisingly, never found their way onto the published pages.) The waltzes are quite wonderful compositions—difficult to play, rhythmically fiendish, fresh and spontaneous, and utterly unacademic. Debussy played them for Liszt (still barely alive) and Ravel played them with Ricardo Viñes for their composer. Chabrier was at the high point of his output. And 1885 saw the premiere of his near-perfect *La Sulamite*, a *scène lyrique* based on the "Song of Songs," that powerfully influenced Debussy when he composed *La damoiselle élue*.

Chabrier, however, was finding more success in Germany than his native country. With a third stroke of the incredibly bad luck that dogged his operas, the love-and-death flavored *Gwendoline* had been forced out of the repertoire before it had a chance to establish itself, this time on account of the bankruptcy of its impresario. As was the case with Hector Berlioz, Chabrier would find in Germany the acceptance and acclaim denied to him in his own land. The German houses that staged *Le Roi Malgré Lui* and *Gwendoline* were open to him though his friendship with the conductors Felix Mottl and Hans Richter. And it was through Richter that Chabrier was invited to Wahnfried, home of the deceased Wagner. Even in these sacred precincts, Chabrier could not but be true to type. Though Cosima Wagner was initially pleased with his assimilation of the Wagnerian idiom, her good feelings dispersed when she realized, after later hearings of Chabrier's music, that he was not as devoted to the cause as many of his countrymen. As usual, Chabrier had the final word. While staying at Bayreuth for the last time (as it would have to be), he was served an inedible cake that was later found in a drawer of *der Meister*'s shirts.

By 1890, Chabrier was at the end of his creative career. His wife's poor health left him unable to work for long periods. Even more ominously, there was accumulating evidence that illness was affecting his ability to compose. Never a prolific composer, he

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abandoned projects with increasing frequency. Chabrier's last large work was the opera *Briséïs*, based on a libretto by Catulle Mendès and Ephraïm Mikhaël. He was only able to complete the first act before his death and Debussy, who loathed the posturing Mendès ("with his fat airship walk"), believed that Chabrier's efforts to satisfy his librettist pushed him into his grave.

But, in a final burst of creativity, Chabrier composed a sequence of *mélodies*, based on poems by Rostand and Rosamonde Gérard. These songs about turkeys, pigs, ducks, and cicadas (he never finished the "Waltz of the Calves" and the "Rats' Galop") are among his most delightful works. Writing to his publishers, Chabrier said

> What I don't want to do is write . . . this musical snot where one is in love in April or May or when the flowers begin to bloom. . . . Chausson . . . Debussy, etc. have composed ingenious and obscure music, often sad, melancholy, or tormented, so that when they are sung, listeners think you are burying the devil or giving out Extreme Unction. . . . I'd like to compose happy music . . . anything rather than that stuff like Fauré's.

From 1892, Chabrier was increasingly lethargic, unable to concentrate or compose. His finances deteriorated badly. He was forced to take students, a situation for which, as the ultimate unacademic, he was poorly suited. He applied for the position of chief inspector for music in schools, a salaried appointment with only nominal duties. Though Chabrier was a serious contender for the position, his friend Gabriel Fauré, usually thought to be a man of almost saintly rectitude, wrote to the minister in charge of the appointment, asking that (the terminally ill) Chabrier be denied the position in favor of him, Fauré. Things worked out well for Fauré—he received the appointment and, ten years later, was head of the Conservatoire. Chabrier, meanwhile, had long since taken up residence in Montparnasse cemetery. Losing the inspectorate was not to be Chabrier's final stroke of professional misfortune. When *Gwendoline* was finally performed at the Paris Opera in December 1893, he was so ill that he was unable to recognize his own music, commenting that the mighty *Epithalamium* in the second act sounded "pretty good!" Two nights later when the opera finished to a loud ovation, Chabrier sat in his box, surrounded by his weeping wife and sons, oblivious to the cheering and praise. His death the following September was a mere formality.

Chabrier's "sound" is immediately recognizable. His proto-impressionism was a singular influence on Debussy. His musicianship and sense of humor delighted the young Satie who begged him for lessons. Ravel's piano pieces and songs are colored by many of the techniques and emotions we associate with Chabrier. The uninhibited gaiety of Poulenc and Milhaud, as well as their wistful sentiment, directly descends from the first composer since Mozart to practice the philosophy that serious music need not be somber. Even Richard Strauss, who conducted *Gwendoline* and *Briséïs* at the Munich opera, assimilated important elements of Chabrier's style, as is apparent from works as diverse as *Salome*, *Arabella*, and *Ein Heldenleben*.

George Orwell once wrote that at age fifty everyone has the face they deserve. The point is even more evident for Chabrier at one-hundred-and-sixty. He is buried in the rear of Montparnasse cemetary, several rows back from the Porte Froidevaux. (Montparnasse is where a number of other composers—Saint-Saëns, d'Indy, and Franck among them—also rest.) It takes time and patience to find the location of any grave here, if one approaches the task by following the cemetery map and by reading the inscriptions. The easiest way to spot Chabrier's place, though, is to step back and take in the larger view. At a distance, Chabrier's bronze bust is immediately apparent on the horizon. His image, manically amused on account of the verdigris, smiles down at his visitors, looming over his colleagues in death, as in life.

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Poems
by Timothy Steele & Dick Davis

Starr Farm Beach

Although the beach, with its adjacent r's,
Alluded to a dairy farm nearby,
We liked to think that, on the shoreline, stars
Were sown and grown and gathered for the sky.
Along the cliffs that led there, we would try
To find good foot- and handholds, and would weigh
The merits of the low road and the high
Or scan the waters north towards Malletts Bay.

Some evenings, from the cliff face, we'd review
The early piercing stars above the lake
And disregard their long-ago debut
To guess which were of recent, local make.
And we imagined if we stayed awake
All through the night, we'd see ghost gleaners, bent
Over the shallows, choosing stars to take
At dawn back with them to the firmament.

We loved swifts that performed wild swoops and swings
Over the lake in unobstructed air;
We loved fish that, in sudden surfacings,
Nabbed supper with quick piscine savoir-faire.
But we best loved stars rising here and there,
Whether from hopes of something we might sow
Or from a lonely impulse to declare
The kinship of the lofty and the low.

—Timothy Steele

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Snow

The soundless character
Of snow was like a mood.
Out after supper, we
Felt both thrilled and subdued:
Our street had been transfigured
Into a lovely waste
But for the cones of lamplight
Its boundaries effaced.

We'd play touch football, passes
Wobbling from mittened hands;
We'd skid round, lacking traction
That stopping or cutting demands.
We'd pause for barreling plows,
The night's true juggernauts,
That cast off fans of snow
Like ocean-slicing yachts.

Disbanding, we could hear
Long after we could see
Each other; night resumed
Its mute autonomy,
Emptied of us and filling
With the thick-slanting snows
Through which occasional cars
Would—their chains jingling—nose.

—Timothy Steele

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Guides for the soul

Who thickens from the shadows as you die?
Who silences your comprehending cry?

Emblem of all you lost and now inherit,
What psychopomp attends your parting spirit?

The unattainable belovèd who
Usurped your life once, and eluded you?

The worshipped clerisy, your sacred dead
Oracular inside your dreaming head?

They may be there—lost somewhere in the host
Of those who welcome your convulsive ghost.

It is a crowd that parts for you, a throng
Among whom now, forever, you belong:

They are the pleas you had no patience for,
The pathos you brushed off: the waiting shore

Is filled with those you failed. You recognize
The sum of what you are in their blank eyes.

—Dick Davis

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Theater

The measure of smartness

by Mark Steyn

I ought to declare an interest: I do not intend to say anything nice about *Reading Lyrics*,[1] the new magnum opus edited by Robert Gottlieb and Robert Kimball, because Mr. Gottlieb, one of the grand panjandrums of American letters, was snotty about me in *The New York Times*. So nuts to him: I regard him, in that useful British expression, as a complete pillock. It's all personal, and we should not pretend otherwise. (Martin Peretz, in *The New Republic* the other day, loftily deplored an "ugly" column by "one Mark Steyn." That "one" is an exquisite and characteristically American touch—they teach it in journalism school, I believe. Mr. Peretz knows full well who I am, as the only reason he's sniping at me is because, in an entirely different column, I sniped at him; he had criticized Governor Bush for calling his dog "Spot" and I pointed out that, as canine names go, it was better than Al Gore having a poodle called "Martin.")

However, if I were to say anything nice about *Reading Lyrics*, I think I would congratulate Messrs. Kimball and Gottlieb on the breadth of the book. It is in essence a survey of lyrics and lyricists from a century ago (George M. Cohan, the "Yankee Doodle Dandy" *lui-même*) up to more or less the present (gloomy Sondheim). Song words on paper are inevitably of limited value. Unless you already know the tune, you're never going to be impressed by:

> It had to be you
> It had to be you
> I wandered around
> And finally found
> The somebody who
> Could make me be true
> Could make me be blue
> And even be glad
> Just to be sad
> Thinking of you.

But simple words on simple notes shade and deepen each other—though, for the record, Isham Jones's tune isn't *that* simple: built on little more than a series of four eighth-note pick-ups, it's full of the unusual moments that make the difference between a competent song and a great song. For instance, in "Thinking of you," he climbs from B to E on the "*ing*." No reason for him to—he could have simply gone step-wise—but that's why that "thinking" sings as if there's so much yearning packed into it.

The fellow who wrote the words, Gus Kahn, was born in Koblenz in 1886, came to Chicago as a child, never spoke English in the home, and had no education worth speaking of. But he planted a lot of phrases in his second language: "Ain't We Got Fun," "Yes, Sir! That's My Baby," "Makin'

1 *Reading Lyrics: More Than a Thousand of the Century's Finest Lyrics*, edited by Robert Gottlieb and Robert Kimball; Schocken Books, 896 pages, $39.50.

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Whoopee," "Nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina in the morning."

Lyricists have a lot more formal education these days, and it shows. I took my copy of *Reading Lyrics* to the new adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (at the Brooks Atkinson), and I swear it tried to walk out during the opening number. After *The Full Monty*, it's obvious this Broadway season is meant as a tribute to the wealth of source material from Northern England, and the ease with which it can be trampled into the ground: whatever else may be said, this *Jane Eyre* is certainly not The Full Brontë.

At first glance, the novel would appear to be a terrible idea for a musical. But, of course, all the really successful musicals are based on terrible ideas, and all the really good ideas turn into terrible musicals. The contours of the plot are swiftly sketched: Plain Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall, the master is moody, there's a madwoman in the attic. Not much happens. There's a lot of atmosphere. Dark shadows. Suppressed desires. The tone trembles on the brink of Gothic horror but never quite surrenders.

If it sounds like a ridiculous notion for a musical, it's worth observing that it fits broadly to Rodgers and Hammerstein rules: an uncomplicated plot with plenty of room for things to sing about. If you reread the novel in that context, it seems almost plausible: the atmospherics and the furtive emotions are where the numbers go. Unfortunately, the first big song here is titled "Forgiveness." I keep meaning to write a short monograph called *The Death of the Title*. "Forgiveness," its authors would argue, is so designated because that is its concern. By the same token, Oscar Hammerstein should just have cut to the chase and called "Ol' Man River" "Blacks." This is not an idle comparison. Both songs are sung by nineteenth-century characters advising a certain fatalism when faced with the vicissitudes of life. Here's how Kern and Hammerstein do it in *Show Boat*:

> You an' me, we sweat an' strain
> Body all achin' an' racked wid pain
> Tote dat barge!
> Lif' dat bale!
> Git a little drunk
> An' you land in jail.

Here's how Paul Gordon and John Caird do it in *Jane Eyre*:

> When they bruise you with words
> When they make you feel small
> When it's hardest to bear
> You must do nothing at all.

This really won't do. It's hard to improve on Hammerstein, and no doubt legions of writers find themselves gittin' weary an' sick of tryin'. But that's the point: Gordon and Caird aren't even trying. I've never met Mr. Gordon, a California pop songwriter turned very portentous and self-conscious here, but I know John Caird well enough to know that he's a smart, well-read, highly intelligent man. He co-directed *Les Misérables* and the landmark adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* (both for the RSC); he is a man at ease with the most complex and subtle plays in the canon. Yet, when it comes to *Jane Eyre*, words fail him, literally. True, there's no great big Mississippi River flowing through the back yard at Thornfield Hall saying, "Hey, guys, searching for an image? In need of a metaphor? Over here!" But Caird must surely understand that Charlotte Brontë's tale is a highly literary novel, that its power is in words, and that the lumpen earnestness of the above quatrain brings nothing to the party. The verse has a superficial literateness—they *bruise* Jane with words—but it's dumber than anything by Gus Kahn, and "bruise" is not really le mot juste: it's a contemporary thought foisted on Jane, while the rest, if not explicitly anachronistic, does nothing to conjure the world she lives in. Look at Hammerstein again: the barge, the bale, the drinking, the jail, all very specific, all fleshing out in quick bright phrases time and place and lives lived. Had Kern and Hammerstein adapted *Jane Eyre*, they'd have written something

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entirely different. On the other hand, if Taylor and Caird were adapting *Show Boat*, it's quite likely they'd have written something entirely the same, for the various generalities expressed by Jane apply just as generally to Joe:

> When they bruise you with words
> [Hey, nigger!]
> When they make you feel small
> [Tote dat barge!]
> When it's hardest to bear
> [Lif' dat bale!]
> You must do nothing at all
> [or you land in jail]

It's an easy temptation to hymn the glories of the golden age. Robert Kimball, the co-editor of *Reading Lyrics*, has previously edited the complete lyrics of Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, and Ira Gershwin, and if you open those volumes at random you're almost invariably confronted by something merely serviceable. Those boys wrote a lot of undistinguished stuff, a category which extends even to their hits. In 1928, a year after *Show Boat*, Hammerstein collaborated on *The New Moon* with Sigmund Romberg: the score included a sinuous minor-key melody that Hammerstein called "Softly as in a Morning Sunrise." You mean as opposed to the other kind?

Maybe, with more time, he could have fixed the redundancy, but he had three shows opening on Broadway that year. *Show Boat*, obviously, was a special case: as he said to Kern, "Jerry, this is a big novel. We need to take three months off to write this." It doesn't work like that now: *Jane Eyre* took five years to reach Broadway, traveling via Wichita, Toronto, and La Jolla. Like most shows born from this now customary elephantine gestation period, it's been endlessly revised without getting any better. It has some of the best theatrical talent around—sets by John Napier, lighting by Jules Fisher—and yet never overcomes its principal defect: by comparison with Charlotte Brontë's original, this Jane is pallid, bland, and remote, no matter how urgently Marla Schaffel emotes her overwrought ballads. And the reason she's pallid, bland, and remote is encapsulated in that lyric. In the theater, the music provides the generalized emotion, but the words make it specific. Through five long years of tinkering with this, rewriting that, and, when all else fails, paying for computer wizardry to distract the eye, it apparently never occurred to Gordon and Caird to deal with the real problem.

We're often told by Caird, Trevor Nunn, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and the other maestros of the age that the "through-composed" or "operatic" musical is an entirely different form from its predecessor. They may be right. I happen to think it lets a lyricist off the hook. If you've got reams of semi-recitative chugging along and you're just singing information and exposition on top of it, there's little incentive to master the art of compression—the core of the lyricist's craft. You could make the same argument, I suppose, about Verdi or Puccini, but, whatever their textual defects, there are compensations in a Verdi score one does not find in Paul Gordon. At the heart of this debate is one of the oldest theatrical arguments of all: what should be spoken and what should be sung? In that sense, the modern musical is not "through-composed," it is endlessly, relentlessly sung, which isn't quite the same thing.

The best current example of how a show score can extend beyond conventional song form is not Lloyd Webber or Frank Wildhorn and the bombast boys, but, of all things, *The Music Man*. Susan Stroman's production at the Neil Simon is a little underpowered and, to be honest, I went off the show after seeing its cast perform at the Democratic National Convention, since the entire play now seems a kind of apologia for the Clinton era. You know the plot: the slick flimflammer shows up in a hick burg of uptight hypocrites (i.e., Republicans—among the starchy, joyless citizenry, you'll have no trouble picking out Tom DeLay, Ken Starr, Linda Tripp, etc.). By contrast, the music man himself may, ac-

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cording to some technical legalistic definitions, be a fraud and a crook, but in a more profound sense the con-man is the most genuine guy around. He liberates the town from its judgmental prejudices and, by the end of the second act, he has a high job approval rating.

The Music Man was the first and best musical by Meredith Willson, who wrote the whole thing himself—book, music, lyrics. He was in his mid-fifties and was one of those chaps who'd done a bit of this and a bit of that in radio, TV, Tin Pan Alley. (He composed "It's Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas.") *The Music Man* is very unusual in that it's a highly personal, autobiographical musical—a memoir of his childhood in Mason City, Iowa; no source material, nothing to adapt. It's the only real theatrical work Willson had in him—like Jonathan Larson with *Rent*—and it remains a strange one-off, unrelated to anything going on at the time (1957) and betraying little connection with either the American musical play (Rodgers and Hammerstein) or musical comedy (Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, et al.).

Miss Stroman is a choreographer struggling to become a director-choreographer (her husband, the fine British director Mike Ockrent, died a year ago, and one feels her assumption of both roles is due as much to the fact that he's no longer around to collaborate with). The drawback is that she has little apparent interest or instinct for dialogue scenes, and, as a result, they tend just to lie there on the stage, like mini-intermissions between the numbers. River City—the fictionalized Mason City—seems to have been modeled on Disney World's ghastly *Main Street USA*: the actors are like late-summer relief staff at a heritage park, reluctant this close to Labor Day to make too much effort pretending to be small-town mayors and library trustees.

But, if you overlook this admittedly major defect, Miss Stroman shows a real sense of what Willson's about, musically. Her production opens with the railroad car approaching Iowa, with the band right up there on stage playing the overture. Before you know it, the traveling men have taken over to sing the opening number, "Rock Island," a technically brilliant cross-cut of conversational jabber set to the rhythm of the wheels. This is a more organic curtain-raiser than most operas achieve, never mind *Les Misérables*. But because it's musical comedy, set in Iowa, you don't even notice its experiments with form.

The Music Man is genuinely through-composed: Willson's songs arise not from dialogue in the script—"cues"—but from the sounds of River City life, the clicketty-clack of the train, the ponderous plunking of a piano student's scales. "You Got Trouble" musically prefigures "76 Trombones," which in turn is reprised contrapuntally with "Till There Was You": all seamless, all through-composed, but unobtrusively so. As for recitative, large chunks of Willson's score are conversational patter lifted from the script but set to music so adroitly that you don't even notice they don't rhyme or share any of the formal lyric patterns of traditional song:

> Now I know all you folks are the right kind of parents
> So I'm gonna be perfectly frank
> You wanna know what kind of conversation goes on when they're loafing around that pool hall?

The words are memorable, their prosody is natural, they fit the notes. Yet they're unlike anything by any other theatrical lyricist from Frank Loesser back to W. S. Gilbert.

One of the thoughts that arises from reading *Reading Lyrics* is a slightly subversive one: is Broadway really the apogee of the craft? The greats—the lyricists folks have heard of—are the theater crowd: they were often self-taught but always well-read, and the range of references in their work is impressive. It's no surprise that P. G. Wodehouse was the first important Broadway lyricist: those who followed adopted the

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same wacky juxtapositions as his novels, where references to Shakespeare and the Bible jostle side by side with slang and parlor ballads. Thus, Cole Porter kicking off "Just One Of Those Things":

> As Columbus announced
> When he knew he was bounced
> "It was swell, Isabelle, swell."

But some do this better than others. At *Gershwin's American Rhapsody* (at the Triad), I came away regretting that George Gershwin had to give his best tunes to his brother. This is, granted, a fairly incoherent revue, directed by my friend Ruth Leon (the wife of *Playbill*'s London correspondent Sheridan Morley) and choreographed by the great Donald Saddler. It has two unsatisfactory stars—the unbelievably self-regarding Mark Nadler and the eccentric K. T. Sullivan, who, unlike Mr. Nadler, suffers from an almost pathological fear of making eye contact. What is supposedly a salute to Gershwin turns out to be more of a salute to themselves. But, not for the first time, you're aware of how hard it is to do a Gershwin revue. Stephen Sondheim says that all the good lyrics in *Porgy and Bess* are by DuBose Heyward ("Summertime," "My Man's Gone Now"), which isn't strictly true: "It Ain't Necessarily So" is Ira's. And it is, in any case, ironic that Sondheim should be Ira Gershwin's fiercest critic, given that both suffer, in different ways, from the same problem: an inability to come straight out with it and say "I love you." (Sondheim substitutes with an over-analysis of love, Ira with a twee sidling up to it.) But, over an entire evening of Gershwin, Ira's limitations take their toll. At his best, he had a marvelous ear for the robustness of American English:

> Beatrice Fairfax, don't you dare
> Ever tell me he will care
> I'm certain
> It's the final curtain
> I never want to hear
> From any cheer
> -ful Pollyannas
> Who tell you fate
> Supplies a mate
> It's all bananas!

In his book *Lyrics On Several Occasions*, Ira provided a scholarly "Note For Teenagers": "Beatrice Fairfax was one of the earliest Advice-to-the-Lovelorn columnists. . . . The title of Eleanor H. Porter's 1913 novel, *Pollyanna*, is still with us as a term of excessive optimism. . . . 'Bananas' as a pejorative term implying disbelief was one of many slang terms started by sports-writer and cartoonist Thomas Aloysius Dorgan (1877–1929)." All well and good, but then we proceed from that introductory verse to the chorus:

> They're writing songs of love
> But not for me
> A lucky star's above
> But not for me
> With love to lead the way
> I've found more clouds of gray
> Than any Russian play
> Could guarantee.

Most of that's filler—stars above, love to lead the way—and the one bit that isn't—the clouds of gray and the Russian play—is an intrusive and inapt image. It's certainly not how the original character, a western postmistress in *Crazy Girl*, would express herself. And even when lifted from its plot and sung in revue the line still jars. "But Not For Me" is a glorious tune and it will always do good business, but the lyric is not its measure.

The smartness of Broadway lyrics—the reason they look good in anthologies—can be very limiting. Paradoxically, a pop catalogue like Hoagy Carmichael's sometimes seems potentially richer from a dramatic point of view: he didn't write many lyrics, but the fellows he worked with—like Jack Brooks ("Ole Buttermilk Sky")—seemed to share his feel for the American landscape. We'll be waiting a long time for a Jack

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Brooks revue off-Broadway, but *Reading Lyrics* does its best to rehabilitate a few neglected names. How about this rueful reflection from Leo Robin?

> We said goodbye with a highball
> Then I got as high as a steeple
> But we were intelligent people
> No tears, no fuss
> Hurray for us
> So thanks for the memory
> And strictly *entre nous*
> Darling, how are you?
> And how are all those little dreams
> That never did come true?
> Awf'lly glad I met you
> Cheerio and toodle-oo
> And thank you so much.

I like the way the sophistication—"strictly *entre nous*," "cheerio"—is a front that can't conceal the regret. For a piece of contract film work, that's quite a lot to put over in a pop song. Indeed, it gets a lot more across than any verse in *Jane Eyre*, even though the latter has upscale source material adapted by a college-educated fellow from the Royal Shakespeare Company. If *Jane Eyre* is the best that Broadway lyrics aspire to, then the form is dead. Gordon and Caird deserve to be walled up in the attic. And Leo Robin deserves to be better known.

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Art

Baschenis at the Met

by Karen Wilkin

"Who?" is a perfectly acceptable response to the news that an Evaristo Baschenis exhibition recently opened at the Metropolitan Museum. Until the early 1950s, this Northern Italian painter of still lifes was obscure to the point of being known only to specialists, and, despite rekindled interest in his work, the facts of his life remained largely untraced until recently. The great French art historian Charles Sterling, for many years Curator of Paintings at the Louvre, discussed Baschenis at some length in his pioneering book *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Present Time* (1952). "Outside of Rome," Sterling wrote, "it was precisely in the North, in the person of Evaristo Baschenis . . . that Caravaggio found a follower of talent"—of such talent that Sterling called him the most original painter of still life in seventeenth-century Italy. He compared Baschenis favorably, too, with the Spanish *bodegone* painters, noting that like the Spaniards, the Italian painted "many kitchen pieces in which livid poultry and blood-stained meat glow with a certain pathos," yet Sterling chose to reproduce in his book not a kitchen piece, but one of the luminous compositions with musical instruments for which Baschenis was acclaimed in his lifetime.

In 1953, Baschenis's presence in the Milanese exhibition *I pittori della realtà in Lombardia* ("Lombard realist painters") fostered an appreciation of this astonishing artist, but the present level of knowledge about his work dates mainly from the 1970s and 1980s; information about his life was pieced together only in the 1990s. (The Baschenis bibliography comprises slightly more than a hundred entries, from 1674 to the present; more than two-thirds of these and all of the really substantial items were published after 1970.) Careful sifting of archives has unearthed such revealing documents as an inventory of the artist's possessions made by the executors of his will and records of the auction of his belongings held after his death. Historians can now say with some certainty that Baschenis's father was a merchant, that he came from a family of artists, and that he was not only a painter, but also a priest, musician, and collector of musical instruments.

The fruit of these researches was the still definitive exhibition held in 1996 in Bergamo, the painter's native city, which seems to have at last established his importance as the inventor of the still life with musical instruments and as a provocative, surprising, and often first-rate painter. Now, happily for anyone in New York before the beginning of March 2001, a wonderful, small show, "The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis: The Music of Silence,"[1] the first exhibition

1 "The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis: The Music of Silence" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on November 17, 2000 and will be on view until March 4, 2001. A catalogue of the show, edited by Andrea Bayer, has been published by Edizioni Olivares (136 pages, $30).

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of the painter's work to be held outside of Italy, has been installed in the Metropolitan's Lehman wing. It's not to be missed, not only because of the excellence and drama of Baschenis's pictures, but also because most of them are never on public view. There are no works by Baschenis anywhere in the U.S., and the majority of those in Europe remain in private hands. At the exhibition's press preview, Keith Christiansen, Curator of the Department of European Paintings at the Met, a true insider in the world of seventeenth-century art, was exultant at seeing many pictures for the first time. Only the organizer of the show, Andrea Bayer, the department's assistant curator, had visited the collections in which Baschenis's paintings remain closeted—some of them since they were commissioned by the ancestors of their present owners—so Christiansen was in much the same position as the rest of us, and, like the rest of us, he was thrilled.

Despite the expansion of knowledge about Baschenis over the past half-century, Sterling's early discussion of the Bergamasque's work in relation to that of Baroque Italy's most innovative and arguably greatest painter, Caravaggio, remains both acute and apt. (Sterling was no casual observer of seventeenth-century painting, but an expert on the French Caravaggesque painter Georges de la Tour, and was co-curator of a crucial 1934 exhibition that reintroduced this then-little-known master to a larger audience.) Since Bergamo, where Baschenis spent his life, was an extreme western outpost of the Venetian state, we could expect Bergamasque artists to be influenced by their counterparts in La Serenissima, and we would not be disappointed. Yet Bergamo is far closer to Milan and Brescia than to Venice and is located not in the Veneto but in Lombardy, the native province also of Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio, after his ancestral town near Milan. Whether or not this common regional heritage was what disposed Baschenis towards the work of his celebrated compatriot, for Sterling, Caravaggio was the younger painter's primary influence, the source of "the Caravaggesque rigor of forms in which the mind found its satisfactions" and of the sober, dramatic light that wrenches forms out of darkness—a light, Sterling emphasized, which was wholly realistic rather than symbolic or mystical. Most important, Sterling wrote,

> It must have been Caravaggio's compositions that opened his eyes to the possibilities afforded by musical instruments to the painter bent on making still life into an assemblage of fascinating forms. He elicted from viols and lutes an admirable plastic music. Their fully rounded bodies, smooth or grooved, their taut necks and curving scrolls all answer each other through the half-light with echos of arabesques and silky gleams. It has been wondered where Baschenis might have taken the idea of this subject. . . . It is enough to glance at the lute and violin which Caravaggio crossed at the feet of his *Love Triumphant* (formerly Berlin Museum) to be certain of Baschenis's immediate source of inspiration.

That Caravaggio's innovations exerted a powerful influence on painters of Baschenis's generation is a matter of art historical record; Caravaggio's notoriety and influence transcended national boundaries in the seventeenth century. That Baschenis—born in 1617, seven years after Caravaggio's death, he lived until 1677—travelled to Rome where he would have been able to see works by Caravaggio is now a matter of art historical fact. But, as Sterling also acknowledged, other precedents for Baschenis's subject matter existed a century earlier in Netherlandish paintings, a good many of which found their way to Italy, and even closer to home, in Italian intarsia decorations—*trompe l'oeil* shelves and cupboards loaded with books and musical instruments, armor and scientific equipment, rendered with cunning illusionism by fitting together pieces of different woods. (The Met has a stupendous example of one of these magical interiors, the Gubbio *studiolo* of Federico da Montefeltro.) Then, too, in the early part of

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Baschenis's life, Spain ruled Milan, which brought to the region, along with connections to the Netherlands and its art, another powerful tradition of naturalistic still life painting in the work of the *bodegone* artists.

The essays and entries in the exhibition's beautifully produced, informative catalogue discuss the effect of all of these elements on Baschenis's formation. Yet in the Lehman wing, it is Sterling's conception of the painter's aesthetic inheritance that is brought most vividly to life. The show begins with the New York version of Caravaggio's *Lute Player* (a second version is in the Hermitage), from a private collection, a seductive early image of a plump, androgynous, dark-eyed boy in an open white shirt. It's hard to imagine anyone more different from the austere, rather rigid individuals who punctuate some of Baschenis's pictures in the Lehman wing, but once we break free of the engaging gaze and elegant hands of Caravaggio's ambiguous boy to concentrate on the instrument he plays and the objects strewn across the table at which he sits, Sterling's thesis seems amply borne out. A violin and bow, a recorder, and a spinet, arranged with an open musical score, herald Baschenis's future motifs. The position of the lute, steeply angled away from us, shows Caravaggio's ability to render complicated forms in difficult perspective, and brilliant light emphasizes the warm wood of the instruments, each with its characteristic profile and mass, and the even warmer red of the rug that covers the table, while the pale flesh and paler shirt of the lutenist seem spot-lit against a boundless expanse of warm darkness—all of which announces the ways in which Baschenis will address his chosen subjects.

As we move away from *The Lute Player* and encounter Baschenis's paintings, we see echoes of Caravaggio's prototypes (and yes, of Spanish still lifes, too) in wicker baskets and irregular, subtly differentiated fruits, in the palpable darkness of the backgrounds and the tomato-red damask that covers the tabletops, in the perspectival complexities of the dazzling compositions and the tactility of the forms. But at the same time, the longer we spend with them, the more original and surprising Baschenis's pictures appear to be, the more—well, there's no other word for it—*modern*. Part of this, of course, is due to their subject matter. For much of the history of art, still life painting was considered, like landscape painting, to be an inferior genre, the refuge of those not gifted or skilled enough to conceive and execute complex narratives enacted by large-scale figures. Admittedly, Caravaggio's often-quoted observation that there was "as much workmanship" ("*arte*") in painting a still life as a figure suggests that artists, even in Baschenis's day, knew what the real issues were, but the general notion that painters of figurative narratives were superior to anyone else, especially to painters of still life, remained entrenched well into the nineteenth century. From the 1860s on, modernists found still life especially appealing not only because of its essential abstractness, which permitted them to concentrate on formal issues of pure painting, but also because of its slightly transgressive associations. It certainly is the essential abstractness of still life paintings that makes them particularly accessible to present-day audiences. (Nonetheless, the study of historical still life painting has lagged behind that of figure painting: Christiansen compares the state of present-day scholarship on Italian still lifes to that of Italian figure painting in the nineteenth century—one of the reasons for that recurring "Who?")

To modern viewers, Baschenis's pictures seem utterly immediate and direct, free of the complicated historical, allegorical, or literary narratives that can only be understood by possessors of special knowledge. It is easy to enjoy them solely in terms of exquisitely refined painting, expressively modulated light, and satisfyingly orchestrated forms, to savor their glowing, surprising monochrome harmonies, or to become engrossed by their unpredictable arrangements of generous volumes and unnameable geometric masses. By painting the

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musical instruments of the period, the full-bellied, angle-necked lutes and mandolas, the intricately scrolled violins and viols, and the smooth, tubular recorders and angular little spinets, Baschenis seems to have explored wholly modern notions of likeness, near-likeness, and unlikeness. He nudges us into thinking about what the difference between irregular and smooth can mean, and makes us acutely aware of the volumes of air captured by the deep body of a cello, the triangular box of a spinet, or the swollen belly of a lute. Like a gifted sculptor, he piles, angles, and inverts his inanimate protagonists, creating tableaux of densely packed forms, setting them on tabletops covered with warm red damask or letting them establish their own space against limitless darkness; often, he emphasizes the artificiality and theatricality of these constructions by defining the boundaries of the canvas with an opulently swagged, befringed, tasseled, brocaded curtain.

The still lifes with musical instruments are generally the most striking, perhaps because of the inherent geometry, the man-madeness of their subject matter. An early still life of fruit—a display of bruised pears, dusty plums, and a basket of apples—thought to have been painted soon after Baschenis ended his apprenticeship in 1643, is handsome enough but fairly conventional. A group of kitchen still lifes seem to depend less on the "Caravaggesque rigor of forms" noted by Sterling and more on flashy contrasts of the textures of fur, flesh, and feathers, or on the differences between the rigid and the limp. *Kitchen Still Life with Copper Pots and a Maidservant* (private collection), however, is a showstopper, a cascade of dully gleaming inverted pots, molds, and bowls that explodes across the surface of the canvas, threatening to slide out of its confines. The oddly distant maidservant, dwarfed by the pile of copper, is the least accomplished and least interesting part of the painting, which is true of most of Baschenis's figures, although he apparently didn't paint all of them himself. The most notable exception at the Met is a grave child in an elegant pink-trimmed gray coat who stares us down in *Boy with a Basket of Bread* (private collection), as though challenging us to take in the contrast between his wispy curls and the fantastic assortment of crisp rings and baguettes that he holds stiffly before him, or to admire the elaborate arrangement of starched collar, tasseled ties, buttons, and nicely puffed linen that forms the vertical axis of the picture—to say nothing of the unexpected shifts between dark and light that turn a static background plane into mysterious space.

Such conceits—tactile contrasts between the boy's hair, his linen, and the rigid breads, or between cleanly formed, hard, fragile musical instruments and the soft crumpled silken ribbons that serve as slings to hold them while they are played—remind us that for all their formal power, there is more at stake in Baschenis's pictures than art for art's sake, more even than demonstrating the artist's skill at replicating complex forms and an infinite range of textures convincingly. And we need reminding, because the best paintings in the Met's show are so absorbing on the formal level, so amazingly sculptural and abstract with their dense clusters of smooth or faceted or rounded forms, that it is easy to forget about how they were seen in their own time. Baschenis worked in the second half of the seventeenth century, when even the most apparently straightforward rendering was expected to embody other meanings. We may enjoy his depictions of broken strings, bruised fruit, and folded, curled paper for their virtuoso illusionism or even see them as welcome evidence of anarchical reality in a world of invented, eloquent forms, but for his contemporaries, these would also be potent reminders of the passage of time, instantly legible, like candles and skulls, as signals that these pictures belonged to the tradition of the *memento mori*; even the dust that mutes the gleaming surfaces of Baschenis's inverted lutes can be read this way.

For seventeenth-century audiences, too,

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paintings of musical instruments themselves would have been part of a long-established tradition of images that refer to the senses. Viewers would have inevitably associated his works with allegories of the sense of hearing, and they almost certainly would have seen his choice of stringed instruments as allusions to the sense of touch, as well. The traces of fingers in the dust powdering the backs of some instruments would have had a similar double life, both as illusionism at a very sophisticated level and as a delicate reference. Even the solemn little boy with his basket of bread might have been an embodiment of the sense of taste. And so on. Do we need to know this? Well, yes, if we are to have any notion of what these pictures meant in their own time, and if we are to avoid obliterating them completely by imposing on them—as we unavoidably do—contemporary values; try as we may, it is nearly impossible to avoid reading that pile of copper pots as a weird proto-Cubist composition. Yet to modern eyes, Baschenis's allegorical and temporal references are inevitably less potent than his formal inventions, and, in the end, it is his pictorial originality that holds our attention, not his ability to suggest philosophical subtexts.

Another layer of meaning is added to the show by the addition of a group of period instruments from the Met's extensive collections. For experts in the field, Baschenis's portrayals of such instruments provide invaluable information about elements that rarely survive on existing examples, while, for the rest of us, seeing actual versions of the objects depicted in the paintings heightens our awareness of the inventiveness of Baschenis's compositions. At the same time, it underscores how much his subject matter depends on a conception of touch—which immediately shifts us back into the twentieth century, to the work of another great painter of still life and another accomplished musician, Georges Braque. The painting that he considered to be his first Cubist effort was a still life of the instruments he played. Braque said he liked the idea that the instruments came to life with the touch of his fingers and later said that he had turned to still life because he discovered that if his subject matter was not within reach of his hand it ceased to be interesting.

Perhaps similar notions informed Baschenis's choice of subject, as a practicing musician aware of the enlivening action of the hand. This consciousness seems graphically stated not only by the ubiquitous presence of instruments that are strummed and plucked, but also by those finger marks in the dust and the keyboards of the spinets. Baschenis depicted himself as a musician in *The Agliardi Triptych*, the centerpiece of the Met's exhibition, generally regarded as his masterpiece, on loan from the noble Bergamasque descendants of its subjects. In one panel, Baschenis, at the spinet, accompanies the youngest son of the family, who plays an archlute; both figures are crammed behind a table covered by a splendid Persian rug and loaded with stringed instruments. In another panel, at another table almost hidden by books and still more instruments, the middle brother plays the guitar, while the eldest listens. A hauntingly lit still life, complete with dusty lutes, rumpled books of music, and slightly bruised apples, completes the ensemble. A superb homage to a powerful family with a passion for music? An allegory of the senses? Both?

In the end, no matter how much we know about seventeenth-century conventions and meanings, Sterling seems to have been completely accurate in describing Baschenis as "the painter bent on making still life into an assemblage of fascinating forms." He seems accurate, too, in characterizing the results as "admirable plastic music." However fascinating the culture and mores that shaped Baschenis and his art, "The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis" is an exhibition most deeply satisfying simply in terms of pure painting.

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Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

In his paintings, R. B. Kitaj reminds me of no one so much as Saul Bellow. In addition to grand ambition and wholehearted expressivity, which often result in a certain lack of subtlety, both men caricature isms and ideas while habitually rendering human characters as comic-strip figures. To this mélange of habits, Kitaj adds another tic, that of embodying Jewish anxiety and self-obsession to the point of unintentional parody. Of course, his two-dimensional approach to ideas inflects his attitude toward Judaism: what some critics hail as allusiveness will seem to others to be mere name-dropping. But I cannot imagine Kitaj agreeing that one will find considerably more intellectual complexity in, say, a Dutch still life than in a painting of Freud or in a work such as his *The Jews Are They Human?* (2000), which unimaginatively offers a framed book cover from an old anti-Semitic work of the same title—whining to the converted.

Kitaj's choices gall because he is a terrifically skilled artist. His drawings, many of which were on view in "How to Reach 67 in Jewish Art," his recent show at Marlborough Gallery—October 31 to December 2—are among the finest and most genuinely provocative works by any living practitioner of art. In fact, such a wide gap separates Kitaj's best drawings from his worst paintings that one is tempted to believe two different artists create them. Consider such erotic pastels as *Marynka On Her Stomach* (1979) and *UCLA Back (After Buñuel)* (1997–2000). The former depicts a nude, splay-legged woman lying prone on a backless couch; delicate shading and strong outlining give her flesh and musculature, as well as the couch, an almost palpable volume and heft. The latter, a view of a nude woman's back, is a flat, virtually unmodeled line drawing remarkable for its simplicity. These are frank, carefully observed images, free from the burden—so often carried by the paintings—of illustrating some larger idea. When drawing, Kitaj can also display a wry sense of humor, as in *My Cat And Her Husband* (1977), a strongly modeled charcoal drawing of two cats mating. What stands out in the drawings is the nuanced way with which Kitaj handles his subject matter; he eschews commentary and illustration, allowing the act of rendering to be its own end.

Too many of the paintings lack even a hint of this reserve; often their subjects are worked up into shrill, overwrought statements. For instance, *The Sexist (Miss X)* (1995–1999) is completely undone by the contempt the artist apparently feels for the woman, nude but for an open black jacket and red high-top sneakers, who lies in bed beneath a violet-hued wall or sky with a ludicrous crescent moon showing a face in its arc. It's an image whose garish bathos makes it more suitable for a velvet poster than a gallery wall. That said, some of the more heavily allusive paintings nevertheless

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manage to succeed admirably. The modernist angularity and tonal modulations of *Dreyfus (After Méliès)* (1996–2000) aptly convey the constrictions of imprisonment, while the image itself remains just inscrutable enough to keep one looking—unlike the George Bellows pastiche *Whistler vs. Ruskin* (1992), in which a nude Whistler knocks the critic out of the ring. One suspects that in *Whistler vs. Ruskin*, Kitaj favors the painter more for his infamous difficulties—including a protracted lawsuit—with the critic Ruskin than for any sense of affinity with Whistler's aesthetic. (Kitaj has had his own unfortunate battles with critics. After pointedly negative reviews of his 1994 Tate retrospective, Kitaj went so far as to blame critics for his wife's death.) Difficulties with critics aside, Whistler, with his atmospheric canvases that almost shade into abstraction, is a strange artist for Kitaj to champion, as he has long been an advocate for resolutely figurative art.

Filled with a host of demanding, contradictory works, "How to Reach 67 in Jewish Art" will please no one all of the time, yet, despite low moments, it cannot fail to engage almost everyone some of the time. Gallery goers should welcome the chance to encounter an artist who consistently challenges viewers, inspiring both derision and delight.

Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) never settled comfortably into either abstraction or figuration. In his earliest, student years, he painted figurative works, but soon thereafter, prodded by the examples of Mark Rothko and Clifford Still, he turned to abstraction. During the mid-Fifties, he returned to figurative painting, adopting a style that owed much to Matisse. Then, over the last thirty years of his life, Diebenkorn explored the fraught boundary between abstraction and figuration. His best-known canvases, the *Ocean Park* series, which he began in the Sixties, are either landscape-based abstractions or landscapes pushed virtually to the point of abstraction, depending on which canvas one looks at and how one feels about the two major styles from which they were derived. "Early Abstractions 1949–1955," at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art—November 8 to December 9—offered a concise retrospective of Diebenkorn's first engagement with the vanguard of postwar abstract art. The show presented eight works on paper and nine larger oils. Their smaller formats mean that the works on paper condense to a great degree the artist's naturally expansive sensibility, the depth and highlights of his underpainting and the reach of his fields of color. Still, it is easy to discern in these works many of Diebenkorn's essential strengths: the interplay of color and emphatic brush strokes in *Untitled* (1949–1955); the layering of pigments of varying degrees of translucency in *Untitled* (1949), with its strata of oil paint, gouache, and colored ink; the great, instinctive sense of composition in *Untitled (Albuquerque)* (1951), where an area of black gouache in the lower right-hand corner deftly balances the whiter area in the upper left-hand corner, while anchoring a field of mid-range gray and brown on the upper right side of the paper. Of the works on paper, the most surprising were three stark, linear works in ink—one of which, *Untitled (Albuquerque)* (1950), adds some oil and gouache. These works show Diebenkorn uncharacteristically employing a calligraphic line, ink splatters, blots, and pools in a manner that brings to mind Pollock's efforts in black and white.

Referring to this initial abstract phase, Clement Greenberg wrote that Diebenkorn "was the only *abstract* painter . . . to do something substantially independent with de Kooning's touch (and it makes no difference that he did it with the help of Rothko's design)." Indeed, the oils on view certainly evinced a de Kooning-like use of expressive brushwork, which, together with an affinity for diffuse light and a highly personalized vocabulary of marks, amounts to a distinctive "touch." Where the two painters diverged was at the edges of abstraction: the human form tended to pull de Kooning

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toward representational painting, whereas Diebenkorn was especially attracted to landscape. Even in an early, purely abstract vertical canvas like *Untitled* (c. 1949), his affinity for horizontal lines and juxtaposed planes of color—used to great effect in the later *Ocean Park* series—is already demonstrated. By 1955, he had begun to evolve the stacked horizontal fields of color that signaled landscape's increasing hold on the artist. In *Berkeley 47* (1955), a yellow band of oil paint gives way to a pink rectangle above it, and then to bands of white and ochre, red, blue, and yellow, all topped by a thin strip of dark green. One can see clearly the beginning of Diebenkorn's late mode of landscape-based abstraction in *Berkeley 47*, its roughly painted, color-suffused planes suggesting the agricultural vistas of fields and farmland in his native California.

To remain supple, vigorous, open to new ideas and to rethinking old ones: this is the formidable challenge to meaningful longevity in an artist. One can pick out from the canvases of his early and middle years almost all of the elements that went into Diebenkorn's late style. The innovations of Joan Miró's (1893–1983) final works leap out at the viewer like a shimmering fish from a pool of still water—at once familiar and charged with the revelation of the unexpected. Salander-O'Reilly's "Miró: 16 Late Masterworks"—November 27 to January 6, 2001—passes easily over the high bar set by its title. Not one of the large paintings on view would likely be confused with the work of another artist; with their stars and constellations, their idiosyncratic symbols, the achingly fluid lines and graceful compositions, these are unmistakably Mirós, intrinsically related to his famous abstractions from the early part of the century. And yet, he proves that an artist can hew to the fundamental parameters of his style and produce a body of work made utterly new, a version of himself not easily predicted from the life that proceeded it. In his last years, from the late Sixties until his death, Miró stripped down his previous method of painting, defining line and space in the vacuum of a white, primed canvas with defiant black strokes. Spots of blue, red, or yellow hint at unseen chromatic dimensions. Stray pencil marks and partially erased designs serve to rebuke the sense of an ending, a finished work, the approach of death, promoting instead the wonder of process.

That Miró and the other Surrealists influenced the Abstract Expressionists is a well-known fact of art history. Far less acknowledged is the extent to which Miró was able to learn from his younger American colleagues. Splatters of black acrylic radiate from just above the center of the canvas in *Untitled* (c. 1973–1978), drawing the eye away from the heavy black circles and calligraphic symbols that dominate the picture. In other untitled works nearby, thin black drips of paint echo the broad black marks from which they fall. Elsewhere splashes, splatters, and drips of colored pigment partially obscure looping and whirling lines, inevitably recalling Pollock's mode of working from above, with his canvas on the floor. As Karen Wilkin puts it in her perspicacious catalogue essay, "It's as though the mature work of the artists whom Miró's art nourished, nourished him in his old age."

From the Abstract Expressionists, Miró stole only what he could make his own; he had plenty of other tricks at his disposal. The collage *Personnage et oiseau* (1976) uses symbols for bird and person painted on a large sheet of ripped sandpaper, with broken slats of wood nailed onto it, to yoke together notions of delicacy and coarseness. A barely noticeable varnish stain in *Untitled* (1967) stands among splashes and coiling lines like a faint reminder of the receding past of the old masters. Energy, both rampant and lyrical, pulses from Miró's last efforts, a testimony to the unflagging power, taste, and ebullience of an artist unafraid to alter his course just as it might have come to an end.

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Architecture

"Inventing the Skyline": the career of Cass Gilbert

by Francis Morrone

Cass Gilbert practiced architecture in New York from 1899 to 1934, the year of his death. One tends to think of Gilbert as coming a generation later than Charles Follen McKim and Stanford White because his major works began to appear much later than theirs and because his career lasted, unlike theirs, well into the twentieth century. Gilbert also once worked as an assistant in the McKim, Mead & White office. In fact, McKim was Gilbert's senior by only twelve years, White by only six. Though Gilbert began his own practice, in St. Paul, Minnesota, as early as 1885, it was not until ten years later, when he won the competition for the design of the Minnesota State Capitol, that he joined the list of American architects to be reckoned with. That was two years after the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a watershed event in the history of American architecture and urbanism, the dawn of the City Beautiful period to which Gilbert would contribute so much. McKim and White, who as young men were deeply infatuated with John Ruskin, had been influenced by Russell Sturgis and worked for Henry Hobson Richardson. Their careers marked a fascinating (and well-documented) progression from early dabblings in the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival, through their epochal essays in the "Shingle Style" to their final embrace of an urban classicism. Gilbert, however, seemed to emerge fully formed in the mid-1890s as a brilliant and driven exponent of City Beautiful precepts.

Gilbert was born in Zanesville, Ohio, in 1859, and as a boy moved with his family to St. Paul. In this he was different from many of the other New York classicists, whose youths took place in a culturally rich and well-connected metropolitan milieu. Stanford White's father, for example, was one of New York's leading nineteenth-century men of letters, whose friends ranged from Frederick Law Olmsted to Edwin Booth. McKim's family lived in a house designed by A. J. Davis. Russell Sturgis was a family friend, and McKim's sister married the son of William Lloyd Garrison. Gilbert was an auslander in New York. Another thing to set him apart from many of his later confrères (White excluded) was the fact that he never attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Instead, in 1878 he entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Granted, the architectural training there was closely modeled on that of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, but, nonetheless, Gilbert missed out, if not on specific approaches to building design, then on the friendships formed, the atmosphere of the Parisian ateliers, above all on the deep immersion in French language and culture. In some respects, Gilbert was like his fellow Ohioan, the great sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward, who had a thorough working understanding of European models though he lacked, unlike Augustus Saint-Gaudens or Daniel Chester

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French, the experience of prolonged study abroad. Following M.I.T., Gilbert entered the office of McKim, Mead & White in Manhattan before going out on his own, in 1885, in Minnesota.

"Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert" is a fall exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, curated by Margaret Heilbrun, director of the society's magnificent library.[1] Ms. Heilbrun has also edited the companion book to the exhibition. The New-York Historical Society is the principal repository of Cass Gilbert documents, from billing records to personal correspondence to highly finished drawings. In the 1950s, the architectural historian Henry Hope Reed, at a time when Cass Gilbert was distinctly unfashionable, far-sightedly secured the Gilbert archive for the Society. Today, Gilbert is anything but unfashionable. While there is not a single mention of Gilbert in Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture* of the 1940s, which stood for some years as the source of all the history a modern architect really needed to know, today it is hard to find an architect of any persuasion, from neoclassicist to the most woolly "deconstructivist," who doesn't regard at least some of Cass Gilbert's productions to be among the genuine masterpieces of American architecture. The New-York Historical Society and Columbia University Press are to be commended for making so much of the Gilbert archive available to the public at this time. Mention should also be made of *Cass Gilbert, Architect: Modern Traditionalist* by Sharon Irish, published last year by Monacelli Press, the first full monograph on Cass Gilbert. Ms. Irish is also a contributor to the present volume.

1 "Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert" opened at the New-York Historical Society on September 12, 2000 and will be on view until January 21, 2001. A catalogue, with essays by Mary Beth Betts, Barbara Christen, Gail Fenske, Margaret Heilbrun, and Sharon Lee Irish, has been published by Columbia University Press (306 pages, $50).

Gilbert's Minnesota State Capitol demonstrated his thorough grasp of City Beautiful principles, his skill in manipulating classical forms, and his ability to work at monumental scale—this last a very important consideration at a time when the fast-growing cities of a rich nation were requiring buildings of ever grander functional and symbolic scale. Buildings such as railroad stations, public libraries, art museums, and, of course, skyscrapers posed problems, not only of design but also of collaboration among technicians and artists, that seemed tailor-made for the Beaux-Arts graduates, who had worked in collaborative ateliers, learned rigorous principles of formal planning, and designed monumental *Prix de Rome* projects. Part of the rise of City Beautiful classicism can be laid to the rather mundane fact that only Beaux-Arts-trained architects really knew how to organize the many and disparate parts of large-scale building projects. Gilbert proved his mettle with the Minnesota State Capitol project, and partly on its strength won, in 1899, the competition to design one of New York's most important buildings, the Custom House at Bowling Green. In the same year he won that competition, he was awarded the contract for a New York skyscraper, the Broadway-Chambers Building. It wasn't his first skyscraper design, but it was his first in New York; located at the prominent intersection of Broadway and Chambers Street, it garnered considerable professional and critical attention and is regarded today as one of the most important of what we might call the first generation of mature skyscrapers in New York. Its design followed the vertically tripartite organization that had been pioneered by such architects as Bruce Price and Louis Sullivan. A three-story base of rusticated limestone—an urbane street presence drawing on the formal vocabulary of the Italian Renaissance—yields to an eleven-story shaft of dark brick patterned in emulation of rustication but otherwise unembellished. The top four stories of the building explode in a rich display of classical forms, including pilasters,

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arches, cartouches, console brackets, and copper cresting in an anthemion motif, with much use of glazed terra cotta. The building at once forthrightly acknowledges what Montgomery Schuyler called "the facts of the case," that this indeed is a steel-framed office building, while at the same time contributing to the classical embellishment of the city. Gilbert had begun his New York practice with a bang, with a building that immediately placed him in the front rank of American skyscraper architects. Meanwhile, work on the Custom House proceeded, and, upon its completion in 1907, Gilbert could lay just claim to being one of the city's three or four most important architects.

The Bowling Green Custom House is the sort of monumental Beaux-Arts building that in the pedagogy of modern architecture was either ignored or snidely dismissed. The ideology that began to emerge in New York in the 1920s held that such historically derivative works were at best the misguided products of atavistic and culturally insecure mentalities, and at worst a variety of what we would call kitsch. Few people continue to feel that way today. The principal reason is that we now know, after decades of modernist architecture, that Beaux-Arts architects employed basically sound principles of urban design. Nikolaus Pevsner may have misused the term "historicism" as a withering rebuke to this sort of thing, but the fact is that architects such as Gilbert borrowed and manipulated patterns from the vast range of Western experience in designing buildings and whole urban precincts. Their designs, in their hierarchical formal arrangements and methods of symbolic expression, gave both legibility to otherwise brutally chaotic cities and a sound framework for these cities' symbolic projection of their own civic memory. The City Beautiful movement, closely allied with turn-of-the-century progressivist social reform movements, sought to create urban orderliness in buildings that would also be, as Ruskin might have put it, great works of public instruction. It is not for nothing that the undisputed masterpieces of modern architecture tend to be of relatively small scale and to exist in relatively isolated settings. Modern urbanism is nearly an oxymoron. Urban form, while hardly impervious to sensible emendation, nonetheless had been largely codified by the time American cities began to emerge as global powerhouses in the late nineteenth century. To the extent we were agreed that New York should take her place among the great cities of Christendom, then classical notions of order and symbolic expression were hardly less appropriate in lower Manhattan in 1900 than they had been in cinquecento Florence. (Twentieth-century New York, after all, is closer in time to the Renaissance than the Renaissance was to ancient Rome.)

The Custom House, as the site where the customs duties were collected that kept afloat the national government in those palmy days before the federal income tax, was one of the city's most important official buildings, perhaps the most important. Thirty years later Gilbert designed the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. Again he employed the formal vocabulary of Renaissance classicism. By then, "advanced" architectural opinion scorned that sort of thing. It is rather startling to think that the Supreme Court building was completed three years after the Museum of Modern Art's International Exhibition of Modern Architecture, whence we got the term "International Style," and only four years before the completion of MOMA's building on West 53rd Street.

Gilbert's career boomed in the wake of the Custom House and Broadway-Chambers projects, which proved him equally adept at monumental civic buildings and at high-rise office buildings. Montgomery Schuyler, Claude Bragdon, and other critics regarded Gilbert's West Street Building (1906–7) as one of the best skyscrapers yet designed, though Schuyler praised even more effusively Gilbert's next New York skyscraper, a work so awesome that it brought together in one building every one of Gilbert's skills as a designer. Three years after the comple-

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tion of the Custom House and the West Street Building, the self-made retail tycoon Frank W. Woolworth commissioned from Gilbert a skyscraper headquarters for a site across from City Hall Park. Completed in 1913, the Woolworth Building remained for many years the tallest building in the world and the most famous building in New York. Its base and tower form, its soaring verticality, its engineering innovations, its richly embellished surfaces of Gothic ornament executed in glazed white terra cotta have made the Woolworth Building a source of continuing fascination for eighty-seven years. Apparently Woolworth, a man who knew what he liked, told Gilbert that his favorite building was London's Houses of Parliament (not a bad choice!), and rather hoped for something along those lines. Rather than scoff at the tycoon's naïveté, Gilbert brilliantly mated Gothic forms to his steel framework to create what the radio preacher Parkes Cadman dubbed the "Cathedral of Commerce." "In its white spectrality," wrote Montgomery Schuyler, "'it shines over city and river.'"

Inventing the Skyline is a visually rich book that reproduces numerous photographs, drawings, and plans from the Gilbert archive and presents them together with five scholarly essays by Gilbert authorities. Sharon Irish writes about the organization of Gilbert's office. Mary Beth Betts contributes two essays, one on the preparation and use of drawings in the Gilbert office, another providing in-depth analyses of twelve important Gilbert projects, including his campus for Oberlin College and his failed plans for the George Washington Bridge. Barbara S. Christen's essay is on Gilbert as planner, and Gail Fenske writes of Gilbert's skyscrapers. Each of these essays draws richly on material from the archive, is well-documented, and provides real insights into Gilbert's work. Still, some things one might have hoped to be present are disappointingly not. For starters, there is precious little on Gilbert's life and background. Granted that the book is meant to bring to

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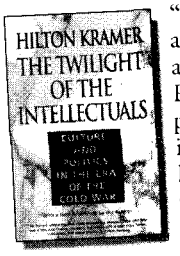

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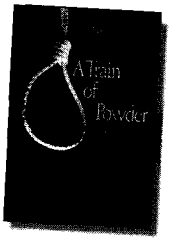

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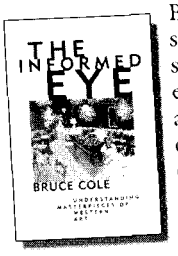

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public light materials in the Gilbert archive, which presumably does not include his grade school report cards. Nonetheless, a little broader context would enable the reader better to understand these archival materials. On page 248, Gail Fenske writes, "Gilbert's general fascination with color can also be traced to his admiration for the writings of John Ruskin." That's interesting. But Ms. Fenske tells us no more, and does not provide a footnote directing us to further information on this subject. This sort of thing drives me crazy. Even if Sharon Irish covers it in her monograph, we are not told so. Here as elsewhere, the presumption that Sharon Irish's monograph is a necessary adjunct to the present volume slightly rankles. Few people are going to plunk down the money for both books. I don't think more on Gilbert's life or on his "admiration for the writings of John Ruskin" is really going to detract from Sharon Irish's royalties on her monograph. I feel a little cheated.

A worse defect is the surprising paucity of material on Gilbert's collaborations with artists. One of the guiding ideals of Beaux-Arts architecture, with its emphasis on symbolic expression, was that buildings ought to unify the arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture. Gilbert worked with some of the most talented sculptors and mural painters and decorative artists of the period, yet there is scant mention of these artists and few details of working arrangements. Surely the archive must be replete with material that sheds light on these collaborations, and it is rather mysterious that so little is said on this score. Mary Beth Betts, for example, tells us much about Thomas Johnson, Gilbert's crack draftsman, yet nowhere, so far as I can tell, is mention made that Johnson also designed the famous and playful brackets or "grotesques" in the lobby of the Woolworth Building. Nor is there mention of Otto Heinigke and Owen Bowen, whose Woolworth mosaics are among the most popular aspects of that building's design. Here, too, it seemed we might learn a thing or two about the remarkable stone carver John Donnelly, a man scarcely known yet who may have been one of the handful of the most indispensable artisans during New York's period of civic grandeur. Unlikely myself to dig in this archive any time soon, I eagerly looked forward to this exhibition and book for information about these collaborations, and I am disappointed.

Nevertheless, for the sobriety of its essays, and even more for its lavish reproductions of plans and drawings, *Inventing the Skyline* is a necessary addition to any shelf of books on American architecture.

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Music

Earl Wild at 85

by Jay Nordlinger

Who doesn't love a pianist in winter? They are among our favorite creatures. We think of Artur Rubinstein, who was never more himself than when he climbed into his eighties, giving those memorable recitals. We think of Shura Cherkassky, who seemed to come alive after his seventy-fifth birthday—or did we simply notice then? Pianists like Wilhelm Backhaus and Rudolf Serkin took on a spiritual glow in their senior years. They became angels of the piano, leaving behind some of the fire of previous decades, but seeing more and expressing more.

We often say of these elder statesmen that they are "links to the past"—and so they are. They reflect former, in some cases antiquated, teaching traditions, and with the works of the piano literature, they are old, intimate friends. Vladimir Horowitz was billed as "The Last Romantic." Then again, we have had a steady succession of "Last Romantics."

Earl Wild is one. Hard as it is to believe, this Pittsburgh-born "supervirtuoso" (to use more publicist's language) is now eighty-five years old. He celebrated that landmark with a recital in Carnegie Hall at the end of November.[1] Few can remember a time without Earl Wild. He began to play in public when Coolidge and Hoover were in the White House. (Wild played for Hoover.) Care for a little fun with numbers? When Wild was born, Rachmaninoff had twenty-eight more years to live. Paderewski was in mid-career. Prokofiev—in his early twenties—had barely gotten started. One of Wild's teachers, Selmar Johnson, had studied with Eugen d'Albert, who had studied with Liszt. Another of Wild's teachers was Egon Petri, who had learned from Busoni.

Do we hear this in Wild's playing? Yes, sure: but we also hear this strain in the playing of, oh, Krystian Zimerman, born in 1956—and in the playing of Arcadi Volodos, born practically yesterday. Pianistic romanticism will never die out, but Earl Wild may be the last roaring student-of-a-student-of-a-student of Liszt: that much we can say.

Let's ponder a few more links to the past. As a teenager, Wild played the piano with his hometown orchestra under Otto Klemperer. He also played in the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Toscanini. Wild partnered the violinist Mischa Elman, who now seems as distant as Joachim. During World War II, Wild was—get this—a flutist with the Navy Band. He pioneered the music of Gershwin. He also worked on television with Sid Caesar (yes). And all along the way, he transcribed and composed and conducted, and concertized and did pretty much everything under the musical sun. Wild has also spent a fair portion of his life in the recording studio. He cut his first album in 1934; in the last few years, he has been as prolific as ever. An awfully eventful career, Wild's—

1 Earl Wild appeared at Carnegie Hall on November 29, 2000.

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and an intensely American one. Could there be, by the way, a more American name than "Earl Wild"? With those two, clean syllables, it might as well be "Jack Smith." In the world of music, this pianist's name has been utterly distinctive.

The Carnegie Hall recital proved one thing right off the bat: Wild certainly looks as he always did, at least since his hair turned impressively white. A tall man with long arms and huge hands, he strides quickly across the stage. On his birthday night, he began with a set of Brahms pieces, which he must have learned as a boy. (Brahms—more fun with numbers—died only eighteen years before Wild's birth.) The first of the group was the Ballade No. 3 in G minor, Op. 118, which Wild played rather prosaically and unmusically. The tone was weak, the fingers sluggish. Shortly after came the Intermezzo No. 3 in C major, Op. 119, which was shockingly bad: It was rushed, unfeeling, slapped at, slopped through. Shocking. And, oh, how the sensitive pianists have loved this little gem! It was a special piece for Backhaus and Myra Hess, for example. In the Intermezzo No. 2 in E minor (also from the Op. 119) Wild was choppy, unpoetic, inaccurate. Inner voices were smothered. He concluded the set with the Rhapsody No. 2 in G minor, Op. 79, for which Wild fashioned his own ending—which is typical of his generation, who were never fetishists about the score.

Wild duly moved on to Liszt, his bread and butter: "Schlocky music for a schlocky pianist," his worst critics have sneered. But Wild plays this music wonderfully—still. And Liszt, please note, is not old man's music, as Wild's recital was not an old man's recital. (What constitutes such an evening? Well, Backhaus—to return to him once more—would program such musing lovelies as Schumann's "Warum?") In the famous *Sonetto 104 del Petrarca*, Wild did some things very well, including some remarkably smooth thirds. In the Concert Etude called *Un sospiro*, he was graceful and limpid, displaying an astonishing legato. Here was the Wild of his highest reputation. The great, sprawling piece seemed small in his hands. The inner voices came through. Everything was commandingly and movingly related.

So it was in another Concert Etude, *Gnomenreigen*: impish, clear, and lightning fast. Wild played with loose arms, and there was not a trace of tightness in his playing. With the fearlessness and poise of a twenty-year old, he made the piano dance. On the final note, the audience, unable to contain itself, burst into applause, though there was still a piece to go in the Liszt group. Yet Wild stood and bowed—a further indication that here is a pianist who does exactly what he likes. After the Ballade No. 2 in B minor, the audience rose to its feet. This ovation was, in all probability, for age (and perhaps for the improved playing after the Brahms). But Wild doesn't need that sort of ovation: he can still earn them. He is not just a lion in winter, but a lion. (It was touching to note, incidentally, the presence in the hall of another lion: Gyorgy Sandor. He must have come to salute his peer: Sandor was born in 1912.)

After intermission, Wild turned to Chopin, starting with the Ballade No. 1 in G minor. Its opening bars—technically simple but musically difficult—were sensitive, introspective, and fresh: an achievement in music so familiar. In all, however, the work was feebly and unaffectingly played. Far better was the Nocturne in C minor, one of the most ingenious pieces Chopin ever wrote. This, too, is musically difficult, and most pianists—even good ones—botch it, particularly the unwieldy C-major section. But Wild handled it all with mastery. He has the invaluable ability of tamping down bravura, not allowing it to overwhelm the arc, or inner logic, of a piece. In the *Fantaisie Impromptu*, the limpidity and grace of *Un sospiro* returned. Here is one advantage of the large-handed "supervirtuoso": no struggle. Freedom. Relaxation. Because the notes are not an issue, all that is left is the music. Wild sounded perfectly natural in this piece—breathing naturally, pedaling

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shrewdly, lending a sheen. At the very end, he gave us a superb *pianissimo*, as gratifying as anything he did all night.

What a weirdly uneven recital! The *Grande Polonaise brilliante* in E-flat major, which closed the Chopin set, was halfheartedly dispatched: perfunctory, dutiful, cloddish. The Fauré Barcarolle No. 3 in G-flat major is another of the pieces that Wild fairly owns: a song, basically, surrounded by technical flourishes (in the case of the Barcarolle, waves). In Ravel's *Jeux d'eaux*, speaking of the water, Wild had a memory lapse—two, actually. After the second, he turned to the audience and said matter-of-factly "I've forgotten it," going promptly—without embarrassment, without panic—to the next piece. Wild is an old pro; he knows not to sweat the small stuff. The printed program ended with Debussy's *Tarantelle Styrienne*, which was poor: slapped at, gotten through.

But Wild offered a charming encore, his own transcription of Tchaikovsky's "After the Ball." Then a ten-year-old boy came out and played "Happy Birthday" for him. To say it again: a weird evening.

Earl Wild has always been an uneven pianist, and his many recordings reflect this inconsistency. We usually get clarity, good sense, and oodles of fingers. What we often fail to get is imagination and spark and inspiration. A persistent Wild fault is that he is overly blunt; occasionally, he is even something of a bludgeoner. Yet in certain repertory he is nonpareil. He is found in top form in an album of transcriptions, recorded in 1995 (when Wild was a kid of eighty).[2] This disc features mainly his own transcriptions, but also those of great transcribers of the past, including Carl Tausig and Rachmaninoff. Perhaps the most unusual offering here is Wild's "Hommage à Poulenc," which is the Sarabande from Bach's Partita No. 1 in B-flat major, rendered in the style of that French composer—a nice experiment, if a tad disorienting.

The pianist's most recent album—marketed as an "85th Birthday Tribute"—is called *Earl Wild: 20th and 21st Century Piano Sonatas*.[2] Twenty-first? In the past year, Wild wrote a sonata of his own, allowing the record company, Ivory Classics, to use that novel and eye-catching title. The other sonatas are those of Barber, Stravinsky, and Hindemith, all of whom Wild knew personally.

Of his own creation, Wild writes, "My exasperation with the twelve-tone movement has led me to think in a more popular vein"; the sonata is "purely an expression of a few moments in my long life." The first movement, "Allegro (March)," is strongly American: bluesy, jazzy—with a Russian inflection thrown in. (These two have often gone together, in music by both American and Russian composers.) The middle movement, which incorporates popular songs from the 1920s, is a bit tedious. It has an improvisatory, picking-my-way-through feel, almost as if the pianist were simply fooling around at the keyboard. This is the compositional equivalent of doodling. The final movement is a toccata, laced with Latin rhythms and a Latin thrust. In fact, Wild labels it "a la Ricky Martin," in tribute to the current pop sensation. The movement is highly chromatic and amusing—it even carries faint echoes of Debussy's *Isle Joyeuse*. The Wild Sonata will not enter the permanent repertory. But it is certainly worth listening to, which is not as slight a compliment as it may sound.

As for Wild the performer, we can expect to be listening to him for many years to come. He has hardly taken on an angelic glow, but he is still Earl Wild—which is enough. And the man is going so strong, who are we to say that he is even in winter? He remains a supervirtuoso—and the only thing truly wintry about him is his hair.

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2 *Earl Wild: Virtuoso Piano Transcriptions* (Ivory Classics 64405-70907).

3 *Earl Wild: 20th and 21st Century Piano Sonatas* (Ivory Classics 64405-70115).

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The media

The familiar hypocrisy

by James Bowman

The election gods will have their little jokes won't they? Last month we noticed the irony of brainy Al Gore's desperate appeal on behalf of a putative army of disenfranchised Morons for Gore in Palm Beach County, Florida, for a second chance to register their supposed preference for him, the instructions on the original ballot having proven too difficult for them to understand. Since then we have seen another bit of cosmic humor in the fact that, in the great "dimpled chad" battle, the Bush forces' appeal to law and precedent in arguing that such doubtful votes should not be counted was slightly marred by the fact that the one and only state in which such votes *are* counted is Texas—and that Governor George W. Bush himself was the man whose signature made it lawful to count them.

But the best joke of all has been in the juxtaposition of the two parties' arguments in every other court case in the seemingly unending struggle for the White House and in that which they adopted in the suits by Democratic voters against election officials in Seminole and Martin counties for allowing Republican Party representatives to fill in voter identification numbers on applications for absentee ballots. Not only in court but also in a fevered round of television appearances, Gore had passionately insisted that "every vote must count"—even when it was far from clear that there were in fact any uncounted votes—in the heavily Democratic counties of Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach. Republicans, wherever possible avoiding the question of what constituted a vote, insisted on following the rules as laid down in Florida election law, particularly with respect to machine recounts and deadlines for certification.

All that seems straightforward enough. But in the Seminole and Martin counties cases, the parties' positions were reversed, the Republicans arguing that a technical violation of the rules in those counties should not result in a disqualification of the voters while the Democrats thought that the whole lot of absentee ballots should be thrown out. Thus a Republican lawyer in the Seminole County trial, Terry Young, told Judge Nikki Ann Clark with an almost Gore-like solemnity that "A ballot is not just a piece of paper. It is a voice—and a voice that, at all costs, should not be silenced." Meanwhile, the Democratic lawyer, Gerald F. Richman, argued that the Republican insertion of identification numbers on ballot applications from which they had been omitted by a printer's error had amounted to the defilement of "the sanctity of the ballot." Presumably there was no such defilement in Democratic election officials' holding ballots up to the light to find anything that could be construed as a mark of intention to vote for Gore.

Of course, it was hardly coincidental that the only consistency on either side of this comic pas de deux was that both of the

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contradictory positions each side was trying to maintain would have resulted in the most favorable outcome for its candidate. That, we might say, is just politics, if no less comical for that. The whole thing would have been a rich and satisfying comedy even without the appearance outside the courtroom of Republican demonstrators from Seminole County chanting "Count my vote!" just as pro-Gore demonstrators had done in Palm Beach and Dade counties three weeks earlier.

But what should have made for gaiety and mirth across the nation did not do so. The laughter died on the lips of earnest partisans oddly desperate to see their man win in spite of the objectively small degree of difference between the candidates. Nowhere was this more true than among media people, even though they had every reason to take a more detached view. Not only, that is, do they make a veritable shibboleth of their detachment and objectivity but, in spite of the Democratic sympathies which those qualities, in fact, mask, they don't even like Gore very much. Nobody, with the possible exception of his family and closest friends, likes Gore very much.

Just look at the extra helping of phoniness he brought to the common or garden variety of political hypocrisy mentioned above. Throughout his political career, he has been particularly reckless in daring the thunderbolts that the immortals reserve for the most brazen hypocrisies. So, in 1996, he had the sheer brass neck to tell the Democratic conventioneers assembled in Chicago of his undying hatred of the tobacco industry, born of his sister's death from lung cancer, when there was on his public record an unambiguous bit of pandering to employees of the same industry and dating years after his sister's death. His shameless use of his family for political purposes, as in the case of his son's accident at the 1992 convention or his passionate kiss of the charming "Tipper" at the 2000 convention, would hardly be so irksome if he didn't so resolutely pretend, with the annoying piety of which he is the acknowledged master, that he was doing no such thing.

At this point he had characteristically gone so far overboard in protesting the disinterestedness of his civic-minded concern that the voters' voices should be heard—almost seeming to suggest that he really had no interest in the matter and could scarcely care less about his own fate if only this sacred principle could be upheld by the recalcitrant courts—that he was beginning to be mocked for it in the press even before he publicly reversed himself and lent his support to the suits in Seminole and Martin counties. Up until the day before Judge Clark heard evidence in the Seminole county suit, the Gore team had been insisting on the decorum of their fig-leaf, that in fact the suits were nothing to do with them but entirely the idea of local Democrats. But that was also the day after his flagship suit attempting to force a recount of the disputed counties had been (as it seemed at the time) sent to the bottom with all hands by Judge N. Sanders Sauls. When it began to look as if his only remaining hope was to disenfranchise all 15,000 of the innocent absentee voters of Seminole County, Gore didn't hesitate:

> The Republican Party workers were allowed to roam around unsupervised inside the office and bring their computers in and fix all of the ballot applications for one side . . . even as the Democrats were denied an opportunity to come in, denied a chance to even look at the application. And those applications were thrown out. Now that doesn't seem fair to me.

Nor, perhaps, would it have seemed fair to you or me if, like Gore, we had inadvertently omitted to consider the extraordinary circumstance under which this special concession was granted, namely that some of the applications sent out by the Republican Party had been misprinted and the voter's date of birth had been substituted for his voter identification number. In any case,

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it might have seemed a rather draconian remedy for such "unfairness" to throw out the legally completed ballots along with the illegal ones because there was no way of telling which were which.

But Gore's disingenuousness in backing the Seminole County suit after December 5 was of a piece with his disingenuousness in avoiding doing so before that. *The Orlando Sentinel* reported that the case had been filed in consultation with one of Gore's lawyers, Mitchell Berger, and that the plaintiff, a local personal-injury lawyer and Democratic contributor named Harry Jacobs, had also consulted with Mark Herron, the lawyer for the Democratic National Committee—the man who had written the famous memo to local Democrats on how to disqualify military absentee ballots. Jacobs's lawyer, Mr. Richman, acknowledged to *The New York Times* that "he had 'batted around some ideas' with members of the Gore legal team but that he and his colleagues were trying the case on their own." In a more unguarded moment, he admitted that "We're probably the last shot Gore's got . . . and probably the best."

Just as certainly as this was true, so certainly were both the Gore campaign and the press determined not to say so. With the same sort of scrupulousness with which they would have used the word "allegedly" in a crime report, the press invariably included the campaign's disclaimers of any involvement. "But Jacobs and Richman said that despite their requests, they have received no help from Gore's legal team," said James V. Grimaldi and Peter Slevin in *The Washington Post*: "'There is no one from the Gore camp that in any way [is] directing what is going on in this case,' Richman said. 'This is a group of volunteers [attorneys] who believe in the integrity of the process.'"

And I'm Marie of Roumania. It is not so much the politicians' hypocrisies that annoy—although in Gore's case he has as usual taken care to make them as annoying as possible—as the complicity in them of our fearless, truth-telling press. Editorially, to be sure, there was a certain amount of cluck-clucking. "To seize on technical violations to wipe out the absentee vote in two counties is a remedy far in excess of the error," said *The New York Times*. "The vice president acknowledged as much by originally opting not to join the lawsuits brought by local lawyers with strong ties to the Democratic Party. Now his refusal to forcefully call on his local supporters to drop the suit, or to rule out benefitting from its outcome, represents a failure of statesmanship on his part."

Not, of course, that his frantic clawing to maintain a legal handhold on some claim, any claim, to the victory that had eluded him was less than statesmanlike! Other media outlets were more indulgent. *The Los Angeles Times* called Gore's endorsement of the Seminole County suit after all his claims of having had nothing to do with it "a subtle evolution of his position." John Roberts on the CBS "Evening News" reported that "With options to count disputed ballots running out, Gore today turned about face and for the first time publicly embraced two other court cases that seek to throw out thousands of Republican absentee votes in Seminole and Martin Counties" having "found a way to make [the suits] fit his philosophy by claiming that Democratic voters were treated unfairly."

Roberts treated this claim at face value and did not ask who were the Democratic voters claiming to have been treated unfairly, though there were none. Gore's false claim at the White House news conference where he reversed his position on the Seminole and Martin County suits that "there were more than enough votes to make the difference that were apparently thrown into the—the applications for ballots were thrown into the trash can by the supervisor of elections there" was not examined by any of the networks except for the Fox News Channel, which noted that no such claim had been made by the plaintiffs in the case.

Part of the reason that the press was not

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louder in its ridicule of Gore is that it seemed quite likely that he himself really believed in his own high-mindedness, both when he argued on principle for counting votes and when he argued on principle for not counting them. At least he was sincere. Dangerously delusional, maybe, but sincere. But it was also true that the willing suspension of the journalistic sense of humor in the face of the shameless prevarications of the Clinton-Gore years has now become a habit. Still, it comes as a surprise when its benefits are so automatically extended from that charming rogue, Bill Clinton, to the utterly charmless and, indeed, widely hated Al Gore. From the media's point of view even Gore is preferable to a Bush presidency, Mark II. Not that they're biased or anything.

As always, however, it is not the bias but the journalist's sense of his own importance which has the biggest impact on the coverage. Here, for example, is how James V. Grimaldi and Ceci Connolly of *The Washington Post* explain the Seminole County case. For them it is merely an adjunct to the behind-the-scenes (and therefore by definition more important) story of Gore's hiring of the super-litigator David Boies, slayer of Microsoft, to argue for him in the Florida courts. Boies, they tell us, "has assembled a remarkable string of victories over three decades by employing aggressive, innovative, and relentless legal maneuvering. Any courtroom tactic that worked was fair game so long as it helped win the case."

> But within days of naming Boies his chief field commander in the battle for the presidency, Gore set firm limits on the veteran litigator, rejecting, for example, his suggestion that Gore join an effort to throw out thousands of absentee ballots on the grounds they [an error: the ballots weren't altered, only the applications for them were] were altered illegally by Republicans in Seminole County. That gambit, Gore told Boies and key members of the legal team privately, would have undermined the vice president's plea to the nation to count every vote in Florida, according to people familiar with the discussions.
>
> The unusual dynamics of this case, and the limits it has placed on the way Boies can operate, have the potential to rob the veteran litigator of many of the tools that earned him a reputation as one of the country's top lawyers.

There's drama for you! Al Gore's hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness are by now too familiar to be news, and remarking on them would be censured as "bias," but the tragedy of the super-lawyer whose brilliance was quenched and his freedom of maneuver constrained by the iron yoke of public relations—subsequently, of course, quite easily shrugged off—was also more interesting because it took us behind the scenes, to a place where only the journalists or others with "access" could penetrate.

Whatever may be his courtroom skills, Boies certainly proved to be a master at manipulating the press with this kind of flattery. Thus, Mr. Grimaldi and Miss Connolly solemnly inform us, "in a political organization where media schmoozing is almost verboten, Boies has been given the freedom to speak with reporters on camera and around the dining tables of local restaurants." Lest we think they were born yesterday, they add: "Part of his friendliness with the media is strategic." Only part? He really, really likes them as well? No, no. It seems he has an ulterior motive, which is that "he uses reporters to test the power of his arguments." And they quote Ronald Klain, Gore's man-on-the-scene in Florida as backing up Boies's tribute to the wisdom of his journalistic monitors: "You're getting an opportunity to really test your answers and see whether somebody has a point you haven't thought of."

> Klain, who in the past has suffered the consequences of appearing too chummy with the media, said he has seen this in action: "He will come back with exchanges with the press and say, 'We need to think about this argument for the brief and this argument for the motion.'"

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Two nights before filing the election-contest lawsuit in Leon County, Boies tested one position, whether to join the case filed against the Seminole County Canvassing Board. In the case, an election official is accused of permitting a GOP official to change errors on 4,700 Republican absentee-ballot applications and a Florida lawyer has sued, saying that all 15,000 of the ballots should be tossed out in the GOP-leaning county.

In an ad hoc session with reporters at Andrew's Bar & Grill, a hangout near the courthouses and Capitol dome, Boies discussed filing a separate lawsuit over the Seminole ballots. He suggested asking the court to determine which voters properly filled out the absentee-ballot applications and allowing those voters to vote again.

Reporters around the table looked at him incredulously. "If you guys don't buy it, I'm not sure it's going to get very far," Boies said.

It must have been so nice for the reporters to know that they were making a contribution that they failed to notice that they had thus accepted an invitation to see the case from Gore's point of view—and to assume that their readers do too. Thus we have an analysis of the public relations problem which treats us as if we were somehow not part of the public with whom those same relations have to be taken into consideration. That's what it is to be an insider, I guess, and to continue to be treated as one was enough of a motivation for the press's dogged and humorless support of Gore during his long march through the courts.

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Books

No idiocy like educated idiocy

by Anthony Daniels

Man is born rich, but almost everywhere is poor.

It is to the elucidation of this paradox that many of the finest minds of Latin America have been devoted for nearly a century. And the best answer they have been able to give is that most men are poor because a few men are rich. And, by the same token, those few men are rich because most men are poor. On this view, wealth is a form of institutionalized plunder. Nothing had to be—or remains to be—discovered, invented, or developed. The wealth of the world has been the same since the beginning of time and will remain the same until the end of time. Hence your slice of the economic cake, both personal and international, necessarily decreases the size of mine, and thus poverty is always someone else's fault. This means that the wealth of Europe and America was erected on a foundation of cheap bananas.

These ideas—a kind of anti-Semitism *sans* the Jews—are so absurd that they are almost auto-refuting, at least for anyone with a few facts at his disposal and a minimal ability to think connectedly. Yet they have had an historical importance and influence vastly disproportionate to their intellectual merit, and have even constituted an unassailable orthodoxy among Latin American intellectuals, some of them of great distinction. Indeed, it was hardly possible for someone to be considered an intellectual at all in Latin America unless he subscribed to these ideas. A man who pointed out their logical and empirical shortcomings was considered a traitor to the patria and most likely in the pay of the CIA to boot.

The Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot[1] is therefore a deeply iconoclastic book, to an extent that no one unfamiliar with Latin American intellectual life, economic theorizing, historiography, and even theology would suspect. The dialectical ease with which the authors are able to dispose of prevailing orthodoxy is no guide to the courage that is necessary to do so. For Latin American literati to argue that the poverty of Bolivia or Honduras is not caused by the rapacity of the United States is a little like arguing in Saudi Arabia that the prophet was the victim of a psychiatric disorder.

The book works best as a kind of twentieth-century bestiary, in which appear the sea-monsters of Latin American political economy and philosophy. It is a valuable work of historical conservation because it is not impossible that in a few years it will be denied that such foolish ideas were ever given wide currency. (The Library of St Antony's College, Oxford, threw out its Ceausescu-era Romanian collection within weeks of the dictator's downfall, since they were no longer 'relevant.')

1 *The Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot*, by Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, Carlos Alberto Montaner, and Alvaro Vargas Llosa; Madison Books, 218 pages, $24.95.

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The "Latin American Idiot" of the book's title is not, of course, the uneducated peasant or slum-dweller, because it takes a degree of education to be able to deny obvious truths and defend obvious falsehoods. The Idiot of the title is thus the university-educated intellectual trained in what must now, alas, be called the inhumanities. This type, produced in ever larger numbers, discovered to his chagrin that his accession to the educated minority did not automatically reward him with the high position in society of which he believed himself worthy and to which he also believed himself entitled. Nothing was left for him but the sour consolation of resentment, and the theory that wealth is the cause of poverty (and vice versa) fitted his bill perfectly.

Latin American universities (which, ever since the reform movement in 1919 at Cordoba University in Argentina, have cherished and defended their autonomy from the state) were for many years centers of revolutionary ferment in which it was dangerous for students to dissent from the ideas of the Latin American Idiot. To think differently was to risk social ostracism or worse. Revolutionary squalor reigned everywhere, and a situation developed in the 1970s and 1980s in which there was violent anarchy within the confines of the university, tempered by the operation of death squads without. *Sendero Luminoso* ("The Shining Path") was perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of Latin American idiocy, indeed its platonic distillation, and it was entirely the product of Ayacucho University in Peru.

Even when the beliefs of the Latin American Idiot did not impel him into revolutionary action, they caused him to support or adopt disastrously impoverishing economic policies. The Idiot in power was always a catastrophe. Juan Domingo Perón of Argentina and Alan García Pérez of Peru are two shining examples, and proof moreover—if any were needed—that the belief that wealth is plunder never stopped anyone from indulging in a little plunder on his own account.

Perón had the distinction of turning Argentina into a Third World country when, for the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, it had been the equal of Canada or Australia. In other words, he so comprehensively destroyed prosperity with his xenophobic populism that, in Argentina, the question as to the origin of poverty was entirely answerable. (Perónism has inspired an entire academic literature, with titles such as *The Reversal of Development*.) Perón's feat of national impoverishment has, perhaps, been equalled only by that eternal gazer down the wrong end of the telescope, Fidel Castro, who inherited a country at approximately the economic level of Italy and will leave it to his successor at a level closer to that of Guinea or Tanzania. Needless to say, Latin American Idiots have no difficulty in persuading themselves that Cuba's problems before Castro were caused by trade with America, whereas its problems after Castro were caused by absence of trade with America.

As for Alan García Pérez, the genius of his economic management can best be captured by a personal anecdote. One afternoon in Arequipa, I went out for a cup of tea. I was running short of intis, which at the time were exchanging at 90,000 to the dollar (and one new inti equalled 1,000 old, pre-García soles). I decided to have my cup of tea before changing my money, which was just as well, because by the time I had finished it the exchange rate had risen to 110,000 intis to the dollar. Needless to say, you could buy nothing much more substantial than a cup of tea or a taxi ride with the national currency, and thus the fervent radical Peruvian nationalist de facto dollarized the entire Peruvian economy.

There is no idiocy like educated idiocy, and it takes a certain kind of utterly useless and tendentious erudition to produce a book with a title such as *How to Read Donald Duck: Mass Communication and Colonialism* by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, which is cited in the *Guide* as one of the ten sacred texts of Latin American idiocy and

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which turns Donald Duck into the Trojan Horse of American cultural imperialism. Opening my copy at random (the twenty-eighth Mexican edition to be printed between 1972, when it first appeared in Allende's Chile, and 1987), I find the following:

> In spite of his falseness, Donald is felt to be the authentic representative of the contemporary worker. But while in reality the worker needs his wages, for Donald they are not essential: while the worker seeks in desperation, Donald finds without difficulty; while the worker produces and suffers as a result of the material that opposes itself to him and the exploitation of which he is the object, Donald unrealistically experiences the negative weight of work as an adventure.

The book ends with the following words:

> To the accusation that this study is merely destructive, without proposing an alternative to replace the overthrown Disney, we must reply that no one can, by his own unaided individual will, 'propose' a solution to these problems, because there are no experts in the restructuring of culture. What comes after Disney will grow, or fail to grow, out of the social practice of the masses that are seeking their own emancipation. The vanguards, organized into political parties, will have to gather up and facilitate this new social practice.

And there are no prizes for guessing who were in the vanguards.

The *Guide* is intended as a work of criticism, to sweep away the accumulated intellectual rubbish of a hundred years, and as such it succeeds admirably. Nevertheless, one can see emerging from its pages the gleam of a new orthodoxy, to the effect that the operation of the marketplace will make Latin Americans rich, well-behaved, and happy. Once market relations have been established within the countries of Latin America, and free trade instituted with the outside world, there will be nothing left for economists or political philosophers to say or do. In a sense, therefore, the authors are but a mirror image of the Idiots they lampoon; they have merely changed the minus sign in front of the marketplace to a plus sign.

There are several questions they scarcely touch upon. For example, if man were an economically rational creature, free trade would have swept all before it a long time ago. But it hasn't: and even in an era of relatively liberal trade relations, many barriers still exist. For example, while Poland is permitted to export any number of its aircraft to the European Community, it is not permitted to export any of its raspberries. Since it produces more raspberries than aircraft, however, this is a distinctly disadvantageous arrangement.

It is also disadvantageous to the millions of European consumers of raspberries; but the minor inconvenience caused to them does not add up, politically-speaking, to the major inconvenience that would be caused to a tiny number of European raspberry-growers, whose livelihood would be destroyed if Polish fruit were allowed free entry on to the European market. Chilean raspberry growers, by contrast, are fortunate; their fruit is imported because it arrives in winter, when European growers are comfortably in hibernation.

In a world of truly free markets, Western Europe would produce hardly any food, except of a highly specialized variety, and Japan would produce no rice. But protectionists can play upon the fear of complete dependence on foreign staple foodstuffs, as well as on concern about what would happen to the countryside if the growing of food were abandoned. These anxieties might be exaggerated or used illicitly to protect special interests, but they are not inherently ridiculous. And they cannot be allayed by the wave of an ideological wand or by the mere recitation of a mantra.

This does not excuse the Latin American Idiot his idiocy, but it does suggest that the world is a little more complex in its actual operations than the authors of the guide to

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his idiocy seem to credit. In other words, their refutation of the world view of the Latin American Idiot is a necessary intellectual undertaking, but certainly not a sufficient one, if Latin America is to cast off the ideological shackles that have so impeded its rate of progress.

The Latin American Idiot has his counterpart outside the region. Indeed, the academic study of Latin America in both American and European universities is dominated by such counterparts. And most foreign journalists who are interested in Latin America share the Idiot's world view. It is difficult to find books about the Central American civil wars of the 1980s, for example, that suggest that the guerrillas were anything other than selfless freedom-fighters. But it was always perfectly obvious to anyone with the faintest knowledge of either history or human nature that inside every Central American rebel there was a dictator trying to get out.

Not that this would have worried Richard Gott, the British journalist and one of the most talented and distinguished fellow travelers of Latin American idiocy. At the outset of his book about Hugo Chavez, the former military officer and now radical populist president of Venezuela, Mr. Gott admits to a soft spot for Latin American strong men.[2] Indeed, on the evidence of the asides in this book, he seems to admire every rabid xenophobic left-leaning nationalist who has ever ruled in Latin America, including Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the first dictator of Paraguay who was known as El Supremo, and who, among other quirks, cut down all the trees of Asunción for fear of concealed assassins. Mr. Gott is definitely a no-omelettes-without-breaking-eggs man.

Latin American guerrillas are to him what duchesses are to social climbers; he longs to be able to claim acquaintance with them. In 1971, he was the author of a book entitled *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, in which his acknowledgments ended: "My wife, Ann Zammit, would have preferred me to join the guerrillas rather than write about them." And not long ago, it was revealed that he had taken money knowingly from the KGB, a peccadillo that was laughed off by the liberal intelligentsia in Britain as a sign of youthful exuberance and naïveté. After all, he hadn't done anything really wicked during the Cold War, like take money from MI6 or the CIA.

Mr. Gott is far from the only writer to have developed a soft spot for Latin American strong men: García Marquez loves his Castro as Graham Greene loved his Omar Torrijos. But whether President Chavez makes the grade as far as the left-wing intelligentsia of Europe and America is concerned remains to be seen. Hitherto he has confined himself mainly to symbolism and rhetoric, such as paying homage in China to the Great Helmsman whose first words on reaching power were "China has stood up." Chavez found these words deeply moving, though "China will stand to attention until it faints from hunger" would have been a more candid statement on Mao's part.

As for Chavez's scheme to reverse the Venezuelan population's drift to the city by establishing *Poblaciones Agro-Industriales Sustenables* ("Sustainable Agro-Industrial Towns") in the countryside, he should realize that he will never receive the adulation of the western intelligentsia while migration to them is restricted to mere volunteers; only when he forces people into them, and scores of thousands starve to death as a result, will he become a true political hero to what used to be known as the progressive forces of mankind.

There are some hopeful pointers, however. Chavez's planning minister, Jorge Giordani, trained as a development economist at Sussex University, whose Institute of Development Economics was the *autor intelectual*, as they say in Spanish, of the Ujamaa villages in Tanzania. In the course

2 *In the Shadow of the Liberator: The Impact of Hugo Chavez on Venezuela and Latin America*, by Richard Gott; Verso, 160 pages, $25.

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of establishing these collectivized villages, three-quarters of the peasant population of Tanzania was moved by force from where it was living, thus bringing about an economic and social catastrophe from which the country has still not fully recovered. Woe unto that land whose minister of planning has studied economics at Sussex University!

Of course, a populist figure like Chavez could have emerged only where there was strong (and in this case, justified) dissatisfaction with the old order. The politicians of the old political system, in which two parties alternated in power but nothing much changed, were utterly discredited. They had squandered the country's immense oil revenues in an orgy of speculation and corrupt clientelism, leaving it almost as poor as they found it. But, needless to say, there is no situation from which the Latin American Idiot and his foreign acolyte cannot draw precisely the wrong lesson. Far from being too weak, the Venezuelan state is too preponderant in national life, so that control of its levers is the only way to personal advancement. Like many another state in Latin America, it does not so much hold the ring as dominate the fight. President Chavez, at least in his public pronouncements, wants merely to replace corrupt conservative clientelism with honest radical clientelism: which is a little like hoping for cloudless rain.

President Chavez might still go off in one of many directions, or in several all at once. Compared with Mr. Gott's former Latin American heroes, he is timid and moderate indeed, more milk and water than *aguardiente*, more Mussolini than Stalin. I fear that Mr. Gott is destined for disappointment, and will have to transfer his loyalties to, say, the EZLN of Chiapas in Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, whose Subcomandante Marcos is definitely Mr. Gott's kind of guy.

These two books have one thing in common: they both implicitly subscribe to the modern belief that economics and politics encompass the whole of life.

Valiant for truth

Martin Gardner
Did Adam and Eve Have Navels? Discourses on Reflexology, Numerology, Urine Therapy, and Other Dubious Subjects.
W. W. Norton, 336 pages; $26.95

reviewed by John Derbyshire

I find it difficult to speak temperately about Martin Gardner because I owe him so much. As a child in England, my keenest intellectual pleasure was reading Gardner's monthly "Mathematical Games" column in *Scientific American*. Along with a handful of books like Kasner and Newman's *Mathematics and the Imagination* and George Gamow's *One Two Three Infinity*, Gardner's columns opened for me the doors of mathematics, leading me forward to a lifetime of pleasure and instruction from that most elegant and challenging of all disciplines. Later I read Gardner's book *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, which, along with its British equivalent, Patrick Moore's *Can You Speak Venusian?*, inoculated me forever against any temptation to waste my time and money believing in astrology, homeopathy, spoon-bending, mind-reading, UFOs, acupuncture, or any other kind of pseudoscientific flapdoodle.

I am, of course, not alone in my debt to this wonderful man. Nobody alive has done more than Gardner to spread the understanding and appreciation of mathematics, and to dispel superstition. Nobody has worked harder or more steadily to defend and enlarge this little firelit clearing we hold in the dark chittering forest of unreason. If Gardner were British, he would long since have been the recipient of one of our national honors—a Commander of the British Empire, perhaps, or even, like Patrick Moore, a knight. It is a pity the United States has no parallel system. Egalitarianism can be taken too far. In that spirit of whimsy that Gardner himself has often amused us with, I hereby, *in loco Reginae*,

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award him the rank he has earned. For the duration of this review I shall, as a mark of sincere respect, and with—I am sure it is clear—no facetious intent, refer to him as Sir Martin.

In 1976, Sir Martin was one of the founder members of the group that became CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The volume under review consists of twenty-seven of the columns Sir Martin has written for *Skeptical Inquirer*, the bimonthly official organ of CSICOP, together with one more piece that he wrote for *Free Inquiry*. The topics range very widely, from the nearer fringes of respectable science to the furthest, wildest shores of preposterosity.

Since Sir Martin's first venture into this territory in *Fads and Fallacies* forty-eight years ago, entire new species of poppycock have come up to offer themselves to his machete: reflexology, Carlos Castaneda, Bible codes, Afrocentrism, alien abduction, and the "channeling" techniques of Jean Houston (used by Hillary Clinton to make contact with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi). Often it is only the prominence of the fad that is new: many depend on the resuscitation of ideas that have been around for decades, that in fact have their origin in the golden age of twaddle, the few decades that ended around 1920. Reflexology—the relief of bodily ills by massaging the feet—seems to be in this category, descended from the "zone therapy" popular in the late nineteenth century.

The most vexing topics of Sir Martin's inquiry are those that touch on religion. I would argue, and I believe Sir Martin would agree, that a practical dedication to reason involves some judgment about its effective scope, and about the limits of our understanding. "*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*" is all very well, but our deepest feelings about ourselves, and about this mysterious universe we find ourselves in, cannot remain unshared and demand some expression. Religion is not quackery. Yet it has its quacks and its fringes, as science has, and these are proper objects for, well, skeptical inquiry. Some of them are easily disposed of. The business of Bible codes, for example—subject of a 1997 bestseller enthusiastically promoted by, amongst others, Oprah Winfrey—rests on a simple failure to understand elementary statistical truths.

Other religious issues Sir Martin comes up against are knottier. They deserve, and here get, more thoughtful and extended discussion. Very respectable conservative intellectuals—Irving Kristol, for example, and Robert Bork—have argued publicly against Darwin. Sir Martin does not agree with them, but he treats their arguments with consideration. He also gives a good account of Darwin's actual religious views, which, when fully matured, are pretty much the same as his own. The author has described himself elsewhere as a fideist, a philosophical theist who believes in the power of prayer, but not in the managerial god of the Old Testament nor the miracles of Christianity. He concludes thus a discussion of the Second Coming:

> The book [Anderson's *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*] may tell you more than you care to know about this sad attempt of Christians to avoid admitting that the Galilean carpenter turned preacher did indeed believe he would soon return to earth in glory, but was mistaken.

Amongst its many other virtues, this book reminds us that, outside the demanding intellectual grind of mathematics and the hard sciences, we know very little of anything. Our vanity abhorring a vacuum, we fill up the empty spaces of our understanding with pseudoscience. Most often the bogus nature of these systems is plain at a glance to anyone who can think straight (a dismayingly small percentage of humanity, to be sure), sometimes it takes decades to remove the mask. Freudian psychology, for example, was taken very seriously by some extremely intelligent and level-headed people, like Arthur Koestler. It is now known with

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fair certainty to be pure bunkum, except where it borrowed ideas from elsewhere. As Sir Martin expresses it very pithily:

> Where Freud was sound he was not original, and where original he was mistaken. Compare with Darwin. Where Darwin was sound he was original. Where he was not original, as in his defense of Lamarckism, he was mistaken.

Sir Martin is sufficiently devastating when he takes on the Higher Baloney—Freud, Zero-Point energy, postmodern critiques of science (there is a very good chapter on the Sokal hoax)—but I think it is the downright loopy that really tickles his fancy. Numerology is a special favorite, and he has great sport with the obsession of Muslims for the number 19. I also enjoyed his proof that President Clinton is the Antichrist. (Add the alphabet position values of Clinton's initials, W.J.C.: 23 + 10 + 3 = 36. Now add all the numbers from 1 through 36: you get 666, the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18. One always knew this, of course, but it is satisfying to see a mathematical proof.)

I am glad to have had the pleasure of reading, and the privilege of reviewing, Sir Martin's sixty-fourth book. I look forward to the sixty-fifth. I thank him from the bottom of my heart, and on behalf of many thousands of others, for that early instruction in clear reasoning, plain writing, and honest scientific inquiry. And I salute him as a valiant standard-bearer of reason in a world for ever under siege by the armies of ignorance, folly, and madness.

The survivor

Robert L. Mack Thomas Gray: A Life. Yale University Press, 701 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

One of the most important facts about Thomas Gray (1716–1771) is that he was the only one of his parents' twelve children to survive into adulthood, and survival is a recurrent theme in his poetry. The "Elegy" is spoken by a solitary man who turns the poem into his own epitaph. The "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" depicts its "little victims" as happily ignorant of the world that awaits them, into which they might prefer not to grow up; it is preoccupied with the "fearful joy" of breaking bounds, yet the boys "disdain/ The limits of their little reign" only to come up against the unavoidable border between life and death. The sonnet (famously, and unfairly, censured by Wordsworth) on the premature death of Gray's closest friend, Richard West—who was also his parents' only surviving child—laments the desolation of the bereaved person surrounded by heartlessly burgeoning Nature. "The Bard" narrates an encounter between Edward I and the last living Welsh bard, whose fellows have all been slaughtered at the king's command, and who, having prophesied the overthrow of Edward's Plantagenet successors, commits suicide with the words "Be thine Despair, and scept'red Care,/ To triumph, and to die, are mine." Death is triumph because it brings poetic immortality, the only survival on which we can depend. "You see," Gray wrote to West in 1742, referring to his studies, "that I converse, as usual, with none but the dead: they are my old friends, and almost make me long to be with them." West nobly replied, "What, are there no joys among the living?" A month later he was dead himself, and his question echoed through the remaining thirty years of Gray's life.

The accidents of survival also set the course of our knowledge of Gray. His literary executor and first biographer, the Rev. William Mason, abetted by Horace Walpole, who ought to have known better, destroyed many documents and censored others. The hitherto standard biography by R. W. Ketton-Cremer (1955) is outdated and relentlessly dull. Thankfully, it is now superseded by Mack's engrossing, if sometimes over-elaborate, volume. Drawing on the excellent book by Robert F. Gleckner,

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Gray Agonistes: Thomas Gray and Masculine Friendship (1997), Mack temperately argues the case for homoerotic allusions in Gray's work, handling the topic, which was confined by Ketton-Cremer to dark hints about "secrets" and "temptations," with an admirable sense of proportion. Acknowledging the dangers of "imposing the restless categories of our own culture on the past," he recognizes that Gray's strength as a man and a writer lies as much in his reticences, hesitations, and silences as in his confessions and published utterances. Mack remarks upon the "simultaneous accessibility and inscrutability" of the "Elegy": the phrase is equally apt for its author, who wrote to West in another letter that "to me there hardly appears to be any medium between a public life and a private one."

On both sides of his family Gray was of middle-class mercantile stock. His childhood, about which we know little, was overshadowed by the violent temper of his father, Philip, a scrivener and exchange broker whose wife left him and later attempted to obtain a legal separation because of his physical abuse of her and, by inference, their children. In 1725 Thomas, still not quite nine years old, was sent to Eton where his uncle was a master; he was to remain there for nearly ten years. With only four hours of lessons a day (largely Latin and Greek), frequent holidays, no set bedtimes, and no organized games, the onus was on the individual pupil to make the best use of his freedom. Gray's letters home were among the casualties of Mason's censorship, but he and three other boys, West, Walpole, and Thomas Ashton, formed a distinct set, the "Quadruple Alliance," aesthetic and dreamily introverted in character, and drawn together by common experience of disturbed domestic backgrounds. The "Eton Ode," as Mack says, is not straight autobiography but "a reinterpretation, a poetic palimpsest," the kind of *cento* (a multiply allusive composition) which Gray learned in the schoolroom and the form in which all his best work was done. Mack interestingly connects this technique with the epistemology of Locke, to which Gray adhered; the *cento* is "the literary-textual equivalent of the similarly acquisitive, recombinative workings of the human mind," although Gray's fusion of elements seems less mechanical than Locke's model. In similar vein, Mack urges the proto-romantic character of Gray's travel writing, both on his Grand Tour with Walpole in 1739–41 and in his visit to the Lake District in 1768–9, persuasively claiming for it the power to "half perceive" and "half-create" the scenes it evokes with rapid notations in a manner worthy of Wordsworth or Ruskin.

In 1734 Gray proceeded to Cambridge, then still such a backwater that there was no daily postal link with London. There were only four hundred undergraduates—yet the same number of fellows. Cambridge was to be the center of Gray's life henceforward. He became a Fellow of Peterhouse, his old college, in 1742, transferring to Pembroke in 1756 after some drunken students cruelly exploited his pyrophobia—rooted, Mack intriguingly suggests, in a subconscious symbolic association of flames with destructive, uncontrolled passion—by falsely raising the cry of "Fire!" in the small hours one morning. Gray was appointed Professor of Modern History in 1768, and "constantly intended," in Mason's words, "to read lectures," but never did; he knew too much to know where to begin. Instead he amassed fabled quantities of learning. "To be employed," he revealingly wrote, "is to be happy"; work distracted him from the melancholy which deepened with the years. He projected a history of English poetry, which led him to the study of Old English, Old Norse, Old High German, and Welsh in an attempt to discern the origins of meter. In "The Progress of Poesy," he produced one of the best English poems modeled on the notoriously taxing Pindaric ode. For "The Bard" he steeped himself in Celtic folklore; he was suspicious of the forgeries of Ossian, though longing to believe them genuine. Mack emphasizes the formal ex-

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perimentation of Gray's later work, which he compares to *The Waste Land* in its radicalism and startling appropriation of existing materials. The suggestion that we should see Gray as a precursor of Eliot is bracingly unusual, and quite compatible with Mack's insistence that Gray's is "a coherent body of work every echo of which seeks its response to a referentially similar moment elsewhere"; for, after all, that applies to Eliot too.

One of the virtues of Mack's biography is that he directs us to less frequented areas of Gray's work. I have already mentioned his advocacy of the travel writing. Another aspect, from which our monolingual culture threatens to cut us off, is Gray's Latin poems, which Mack sees as among his finest achievements. The "Alcaic Ode" which he wrote in the visitors' book of the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse (so much better than Matthew Arnold's verses on a similar occasion!), his translation of the first poem in Book II of Propertius' *Elegies*, and his Epistle from Sophonisba to Masinissa, call forth particularly acute commentaries from Mack, who follows Gleckner in seeing the freedom and allusiveness of the Latin poems as furnishing a code in which Gray could hint at his feelings for West. Strikingly, Gray as translator tended to leave the classical epic alone; though he rendered passages from Statius, Dante, and Tasso, he was temperamentally drawn to quieter voices and less marmoreal forms.

In 1769, when Gray was fifty-three, his emotional life was briefly rejuvenated by a meeting with Charles Victor de Bonstetten, a twenty-four-year-old Swiss in England to improve his grasp of the language. Bonstetten, the son of a minor aristocrat, was vivacious, dashing, and impulsive, and venerated Gray as a poet and scholar. Gray, for his part, was so strongly reminded of the young West that he invited Bonstetten to Cambridge. Soon they were spending much of each day together reading English poetry and studying. What had been intended as a brief visit stretched over three months.

More than sixty years later, Bonstetten described Cambridge, in his memoirs, as a "désert du coeur" in which the springs of the poet's imagination and feelings had run dry; eloquent and stimulating on so many subjects, Gray refused to discuss either his poetry or his past. Bonstetten concluded that "Gray n'avait jamais aimé . . . il en était résulté une misère du coeur"—not, as Mack mistranslates, "a miser of the heart" but a pitiable atrophying of the capacity for emotion. His melancholy, Bonstetten astutely saw, stemmed from "un besoin non-satisfait de la sensibilité." It may be questioned, however, whether Gray "had never loved." Johnson, in so many ways antipathetic to him, judged more truly in saying that "he was a man likely to love much where he loved at all." Gray's silence in the face of his eager young friend's questionings may have been due to an excess of emotion rather than a deficiency.

Mack does not force the issue—there is no evidence that Gray's feelings, for Bonstetten or for West, were ever more than platonic—but his point, that Gray had welcomed the opportunity to view the world awhile through the eyes of youthful enthusiasm and ingenuous optimism, is entirely fair. Three of Gray's letters to Bonstetten survive, though not the replies; they contain such remarks as "I am grown old in the compass of less than three weeks," "I did not conceive till now (I own) what it was to lose you," "My life now is but a perpetual conversation with your shadow," and "I can not bear this place [Cambridge] since you left me."

As time wore on, the ache diminished; the past became safely past once more, able to be contained and regulated. In the Lake District, Gray had taken a Claude Lorraine glass through which, to use Mack's words, "the various and disparate elements of the greater landscape" could be drawn into a "perceptual whole," then to be further composed through Gray's "patient, considered prose." This can serve as a symbol for Gray's artistic technique as a whole. Like the Etonian schoolboys in his poem, he could

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only feel really free within a definite framework.

A projected visit to Bonstetten in Switzerland never materialized, and Gray died of uremia in Cambridge on 30 July 1771. How did he view his own survival after death? His lifelong detestation of rationalism and skepticism—Hume was "pernicious," and as for Voltaire, "No one knows the mischief that man will do"—supply hints, although he remained characteristically reticent about religion. The remark of his friend James Brown, "He never spoke out," which Arnold made the leitmotif for his essay on Gray, is not as misleading as Mack believes. He was a private man, and even now keeps many secrets. He remains for most readers the author of the "Elegy," and perhaps of the Eton "Ode," the glories of a poetic output which numbers barely fifty items. In the days when such things were prized he was also known as one of the great letter writers. His learning, acquired for ambitious literary projects that remained not only uncompleted but often unbegun, diffused itself in unrecorded conversations. Gray liked to pretend that nothing much had ever happened to him, but such a judgment is both evasive and relative. A glance can be as seismic an event as an earthquake, and if his life was, by some people's standards, tranquil, it was tranquillity recollected with emotion.

The small house

Peter Brooks Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature. University of Chicago Press, 192 pages, $24

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

Confession is all the rage these days. During one recent week, *The New York Times Magazine* ran an "Endpaper" about the emotionally blighting effect of a man's failure to admit an adolescent crime, expiated only by a deathbed confession to his children; *The Wall Street Journal* ran a front page story about Japanese police practices that end up eliciting false confessions from suspects; *Court TV* ran a trailer for a program showing police interrogation videotapes of confessing perpetrators; even the nearby subway stop featured a billboard that suggested passersby dial a telephone number—I think it was 1-900-CONFESS—to have their jaws drop at the ensuing revelations. It seemed only fitting that by the end of the week—right before the pledge drive—my local public radio station invited listeners to visit its website and view an execution by lethal injection: an offer of consequences after all this truth.

In his recent book, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*, Peter Brooks, Chester D. Tripp Professor of Humanities and Director of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University, takes this fascination one step further and concludes that confession—the personal revelation of otherwise hidden and frequently shameful facts about the self—is at the heart of the modern identity. Citing Foucault, he tells us that "the practice of confession creates the metaphors of innerness that it claims to explore: without the requirement of confession—one may overstate the issue—there might be nothing inward to examine." In a "world of massification," confession fulfills the function of assuring each of us that he is still "a unique individual with a unique story to tell."

Professor Brooks traces this "confessional model" of society and self to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which, at one and the same time, issued a profession of dogma, established an inquisition for the extirpation of heresy, and imposed the requirement of yearly auricular confession on the faithful. Since then, he argues, confession has occupied a central place in our culture, with its rituals of self-revelation, punishment, absolution, rehabilitation, and eventual reintegration into the community. Today, Professor Brooks observes, the confessional mode permeates every corner of life, from the popular media, literature, and psychiatry, to the law, where confession

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retains its ecclesiastical status as the "queen of proofs."

Now this is all well and good, but it certainly gives Professor Brooks a lot of ground to cover in 171 pages of text, not including notes. His stated aim is nothing less than to consider the role of all these confessional practices in our culture, as well as our attitude toward them and—the citations to de Man, Lacan, and Foucault are the dead giveaway—the different kinds of truth we associate with them. To achieve this, he proposes "to cross-cut between confession according to law and confession according to literature," not to mention "the religious tradition of confession," in order to "illuminate the kind of cultural work we expect confession to do and whether we are, or should be, entirely comfortable with the results."

In fact, what seems to interest Professor Brooks most is something that every cop on the beat knows firsthand: for reasons known only to themselves, people voluntarily confess to plenty of things they haven't done. And, while under duress, people confess to plenty of things they have done as well as a lot of things they haven't. The law deals with this untidy situation by setting a threshold requirement that a confession be voluntary—hopefully ensured by the "Miranda warnings" familiar to everyone who has ever seen a detective show—and assigning any further issue of truth to a jury of the defendant's peers.

For Professor Brooks, this approach presents deep existential problems. He brings to bear on the legal opinions that embody it the mechanisms of literary criticism, the full weight of contemporary psychiatric theory, and a smattering of other disciplines. He wants to compare the law with everything from old Hitchcock movies and modern performance art to Rousseau's *Confessions* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. He pronounces that law cannot be treated as an hermetic discipline sealed from outside influences—a position that no one has taken seriously since 1908 when Louis Brandeis first presented the Supreme Court with a brief full of sociological data and one that would come as news to all the economists and philosophers who currently populate our law school faculties.

Pace Professor Brooks, even though law is not wholly autonomous, it is a distinct discipline with its own methods and purposes. Above all, a legal opinion is not a work of the imagination. A judicial opinion is, in the end, a command—for example, go to jail—that operates in the real world of time and space. Its task is to grapple with the unruly world of events and fit them into available legal categories in a persuasive and legally predictable way, with all the compromises this entails. In effect, Professor Brooks's argument is that literature and law are alike because they both deal with the human condition, a claim that is at once both obvious and empty. What results from such indiscriminate lumping is neither good legal analysis nor meaningful literary criticism.

Brooks's reading of the Supreme Court opinion in *Oregon* v. *Elstad* nicely illustrates this problem of translation from one discipline to another. Briefly put, after being placed in police custody at his parents' home, Michael Elstad offered that he had been at the scene of a burglary in which he was a suspect. Later, at police headquarters, Elstad received his Miranda warnings and made a full confession of his involvement. The Supreme Court had to decide whether that first unwarned, but uncoerced, statement tainted the later full confession and rendered it inadmissable as evidence at his trial. After a fair amount of soul-searching, the court eventually concluded that if there was a sufficient break between the two statements, the second could be treated as, in essence, a new and admissible confession even if the police had used information in Elstad's first statement in the investigation that led to the second.

The court framed its reasoning in a series of painfully worn metaphors: After the defendant "let the cat out of the bag," did "the dam finally break . . . as a result of the

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first leak?" If so, the ultimate confession was subject to suppression as the "tainted fruit of the poisonous tree." And so on. Now, no one is going to claim that this is great art, or even anything beyond serviceable prose, hardly worth the attention of a famous literary critic. Recognizing the obvious, Professor Brooks explains that he pointed out this language not to "ridicule" the court, but to "suggest how the problem of what prompts a confession almost of necessity elicits a confused, imagistic language in which an everyday psychology traversed by legal dogma yields unconvincing and dubiously analytic pronouncements."

Now, I could be cruel and suggest that the imagistic language of the court is a good deal less dubiously analytic than an everyday psychology traversed by deconstructionist dogma. But I won't. Instead, I will point out that Brooks has missed some important constraints on legal discourse itself, which explain why, although law may look like ordinary literature, it is actually rather different. At the most obvious, judges must reach a decision, no matter the level of factual and legal ambiguity before them. This is a problem that artists and filmmakers don't face. In addition, as first-year law students learn, Anglo-American judges and lawyers tend to reify all abstractions—ideas become things in an effort to craft clear rules. What is more, these reified concepts acquire public meaning by accretion, a little more with each case in which they are invoked. The "tainted fruit of the poisonous tree" may sound like "confusing imagistic language"; it is, in fact, a term of art that evokes very specific associations to anyone trained as a lawyer in this country.

As often as not, Professor Brooks misreads the distinct concerns of the law as well as its methods, something that is most evident when he begins to "cross-cut" from legal opinions dealing with criminal confessions to confessional art and literature in his search for confessional accuracy. As a technical legal matter, *Miranda* and its cousins involve a more narrow issue than truth: whether the defendant's confession will be admissible as evidence at his trial. But more significantly, the primary focus of the court's confessional jurisprudence—like its decisions about the exclusionary rule, which prevents the use of physical evidence illegally gathered by the government—is on a matter wholly apart from the veracity of the criminal or the reliability of the trial process. Instead, it centers on the conduct of the government official who elicited the confession. Fundamentally, the confession cases are about the boundaries of government behavior in a free society. Yet this driving force behind the court's decisions seems to be of little or no interest to Professor Brooks.

In one very practical way, however, the Supreme Court's decisions were of profound moment to Professor Brooks. The book bears all the indicia of authorial and editorial haste, including an unconscionable amount of repetition in so brief a text. The haste is presumably due to the fact that, as of last spring, when the book went to press, the Supreme Court was considering whether Congress had actually done away with the *Miranda* rule in a previously unnoticed provision of the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control Act. The court's impending decision could have destroyed much of the book's *raison d'être*, not to mention most of what Professor Brooks had written about the legal status of confession. As matters turned out, in June Justice Rehnquist held that *Miranda* was mandated by the Constitution and, therefore, could not be overturned by Congress—in the process, saving Professor Brooks's authorial hide.

So, in the end, where does all this postmodern handwringing get us? Well, Professor Brooks repeatedly concludes his analyses of the difficulties presented by the legal use of confessions with the admonition that society should recognize that "this is a confession, handle with care." All I can say is that if this is what postmodern multi-disciplinary studies have to bring to legal analysis, it's a long road to an awfully small house.

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Genial improvisations

Jorge Luis Borges This Craft of Verse, edited by Calin-Andrei Mihailescu. Harvard University Press, 154 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Alexander Coleman

The publication of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures given by Jorge Luis Borges at Harvard in 1967 is an unusual, as well as a belated, event. Those who heard him recall that, as a public speaker, Borges was never an assured or dominating presence, but he was still a strangely haunting and magnetic figure on the stage. It must be remembered that he was educated at home and had the most fragile contacts with the outside world well into adulthood. A stutter from childhood, sometimes heard even in his old age, complicated matters. There was always a sense of hesitancy, even when he made his most rotund affirmations. Sometimes this could lead to exasperation. The poet Alastair Reid, during a public interview, said to his face, "Borges, you use humility like a club!" Often, his sentences would end with a querulous "no?"—as if asking for affirmation by the hearer. And there was the matter of his Scottish burr, learned in his Buenos Aires infancy from his Scots nanny.

In any case, understatement was the essence of his aesthetic program—touching the hem of the garment, as Robert Frost once put it. Fragments, the minor genres and authors, a line or a strophe here and there: these were all he needed to weave his incantatory spell. But Borges only gradually emerged from his shell, slowly becoming a public figure first in Argentina and then in the world at large. He started "working" at age thirty-seven as first assistant in a dusty local library, a post which he occupied until the arrival of the Peronist regime in 1946. Summary dismissal ensued, with a crystalline justification: "Well, you were on the side of the Allies—what do you expect?" Gradually, both as a professor at the University of Buenos Aires and a much sought-after lecturer on literature in the late Forties and Fifties, Borges was able to supplement the increasingly meager family income.

But he was not yet Borges, the international idol. *That* came in 1961 when a phalanx of six avant-garde publishers, including Grove Press in New York, created the Prix Formentor, designed to reward a relatively unrecognized author and to "bring the author's work to the attention of the largest possible international audience." Borges shared the prize with Samuel Beckett. An invitation to visit the University of Texas ensued, and the Norton Lectures at Harvard were offered, enabling Borges to spend some seven months in Cambridge in 1967, in the company of his mother, the redoubtable Doña Leonor de Acevedo de Borges.

By then, he was legally blind, as was his father before him at the same age—his was the fifth recorded generation in his family to have extremely poor eyesight. He dictated, his mother and a host of friends read to him aloud, and his astonishing memory was a recompense until the end. Thus, *This Craft of Verse*, the Norton Lectures, comes to us not as the tardy publication of a manuscript but rather via transcription and annotation of the tape recordings made at that time, assiduously executed by Professor Calin-Andrei Mihailescu of the University of Western Ontario. The six lectures range over both poetry and prose: "The riddle of poetry," "The metaphor," "The telling of the tale," "Word-music and translation," "Thought and poetry," "A poet's creed." They make for delightful, "easy" reading, but on a most elementary level, given the occasion. The phrase "I thought of this only three or four days ago, when I was pondering this lecture" is either revealing or embarrassing. In principle, there is nothing inherently wrong with making these musings available to the public. Borges loved to submit himself to innumerable interviews, unrevised by himself, which have now found themselves in bound volumes. But, the record shows that for his more formal declarations in the form of a lecture series,

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he tried to revise and expand the stenographic record in order to produce a more finished text. For whatever reasons, such a revision never took place in the case of these six lectures.

Professor Mihailescu assures us that *This Craft of Verse* "compares only with *Borges, Oral* (1979), which contains the five lectures that he gave May-June 1978 at the University of Belgrano in Buenos Aires." This is not true at all. Anyone familiar with the work of Borges, even only in English, knows that one of the stellar items is *Siete Noches*, first published in Spanish in 1980 and translated by Eliot Weinberger as *Seven Nights* (1984). These are heavily revised versions of lectures given at a theater in Buenos Aires in 1977. The topics all go to the essence of Borges: "The Divine Comedy," "Nightmares," "The Thousand and One Nights," "Buddhism," "Poetry," "The Kabbalah," "Blindness." The point is that, with the aid of his friend and secretary Roy Bartholomew, Borges carefully had every sentence of the stenographic text read out to him, and then furiously revised and amplified. As Bartholomew said, "Not one sentence [from the original lectures] was left as is." After finishing the task for all seven lectures, Borges said, "It's not bad; I would say that as far as the themes that have obsessed me so are concerned, this book is my testament." One might also add the seminal "Autobiographical Essay," done in collaboration with Norman Thomas di Giovanni, as a final declaration of aesthetic principles.

The Norton Lectures, seen in the light of the pondered texts published by such other occupants of the chair as Eliot, Stravinsky, Frost, cummings, Auden, Muir, Hindemith, Milosz, Leonard Bernstein—and from the Hispanic world, Jorge Guillén and Octavio Paz—must inevitably disappoint. They are really genial improvisations, the poet discoursing by the fire. And there are glaring repetitions. The exact same gloss of the final lines from Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" in Lecture II is repeated almost verbatim in Lecture VI, revealing and sensitive though it might be in both instances.

Borges has given us rich formulations of his ars poetica on many other occasions, but this is not one of them, and thus it is not at all evident why these lectures were published.

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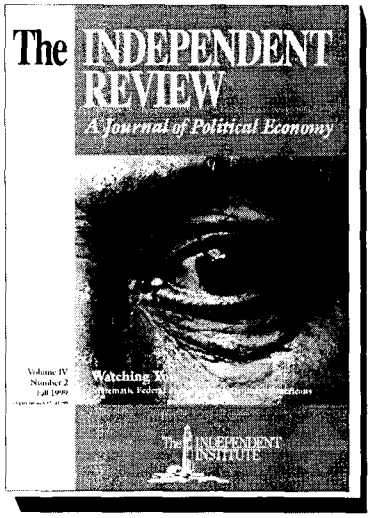

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